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Faith in Action
for Social Justice

DECOLONIZING THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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ALEXIS ABERNETHY

Professor of Psychology
Department of Clinical Psychology



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MAYBE YOU'VE NEVER noticed it, snuggled up there under our logo, on the cover of every issue: "Faith in action for social justice." In magazine-speak, this slip of text is called the "tagline," a snappy description of what the magazine is all about, and our tagline is a pretty good summary of what we try to do in *Sojourners*: faith, action, social justice—words that convey our call to imitate Jesus' abiding love for those on the margins.

Or so we thought. As Jordan Rasmussen tells Brad Roth in this issue, social justice "can be an off-putting term for rural residents." That doesn't mean those living in small towns are unconcerned about addiction, poverty, and other injustices that threaten their community, explains Roth, but these folks think of their work as caring

for their neighbors, not "activism."

Yet rural areas are no monolith; some people squirm at the phrase "social justice," others, including Highlander Center co-executive director Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, embrace it. "I'm grateful faith exists because I don't know if we can build social justice movements that win without it," says Henderson in "The Next Generation of Rural Organizing."

Of course, no tagline, logo, article, or hashtag—no matter how snappy—can possibly contain the fullness of the gospel call to be the body of Christ in our messy world. And that pushes us to continue experimenting: with new language, with new models of



doing church (see page 34), and with new ways of creating space for all in God's family to be their full and authentic selves (page 16). As Teresa P. Mateus explains in the cover story, "When you're trying to lift, create space for, and have sensitivities around people's diverse identities, there's constantly room to improve." ■

Letters

Football Is All Wrong

Bradford William Davis' article about football ("A Deal with the Devil," September-October 2018) has it right! Football is not only unhealthy for kids' bodies, it's also unhealthy for their psyches. Football exemplifies all that's wrong: It's "won" through hurting opponents more than they hurt you, it's full of trash talk, and those who are proficient in it proclaim themselves deities, expecting lionization and abusing others.

Horace Brown King
Binghamton, New York

Unions Are Already Great

I was greatly encouraged to read Tony Campolo's article in support of unions ("Make Unions Great Again," September-October 2018). However, I fear its title may be misleading. Many unions are already great—despite terrible odds—and millions of workers are using them to lift each other into the middle class. Christians should hold one another accountable to practicing love through solidarity, speak truth in love with other Christians, and work alongside other workers to transform our labor-law regime into one that respects the rights of workers and encourages democracy in the workplace.

G.H. Ian Elder
Washington, D.C.

Football is unhealthy for kids' bodies and psyches.

Provocative and Timely

The September-October 2018 issue of *Sojourners* should be complimented on its provocative and timely articles. I am grateful for the perspective offered in them, which needs to be heard in all faith communities. "A Combination of Cruelty and Ineptitude," by Jim Wallis, should be read by every member of Congress and result in adoption of appropriate legislation without delay.

John Hayner,
Clearwater, Florida

Indigenous Spirituality

Thank you for the article "Native Activists Show the Way" (by Bill McKibben) in the August 2018 issue. I value and support Indigenous people's efforts to be voices for creation and justice. When I first learned of Indigenous spirituality that honors the holiness and connectedness of all of creation, I no longer felt alone in my spiritual beliefs and experience. I've come to see that Indigenous spiritual traditions are not all that different from original Christian traditions.

Douglas J. Jacobson
Wahkon, Minnesota

False Dichotomy

In the August 2018 column "Individualism Wins," Danny Duncan Collum criticizes Rob Bell and his fans for their individualistic approach to Christianity and advocates for "big, broad, and truly diverse [church] institutions." He says, "Most Americans today don't need a Christianity ... grounded in the affirmation of their uniqueness and freedom of choice" but rather Christianity grounded in "solidarity and interdependence." This is a false dichotomy. Each of us must affirm our uniqueness as a precious child of God and accept freedom in Christ to meaningfully live in solidarity and interdependence with others. In our current political climate, we need Christians who think. We also need a theology of the principalities and powers, especially one that challenges "big, broad" church institutions that support today's domination system.

Sharon Delgado
Nevada City, California

Thumbs up! (Or down.) Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, *Sojourners*, 408 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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BY JIM WALLIS

'We Know How the Story Ends'



ON THE DAY Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed by the Senate to a lifetime seat on the Supreme Court, I tweeted this: "Today was a day of protest, rage, mourning, lament. Tomorrow we go on by going deeper, and learn that hope is not a feeling, but a decision—based on whatever we call faith. Stay strong and take care of each other."

The nation is in trauma, with many women and people of color in particular being retraumatized almost every day. But Advent is upon us, and the message of that liturgical season never changes. Advent is a season of waiting for the coming of Christ. Christ will come again, and not just ultimately but time and time again, in all kinds of unexpected ways.

So, in Advent, we wait—expectantly—for Jesus Christ to come again in our personal and our public lives. That is our hope, based not on optimism but on faith.

The situation we face in Donald Trump's autocratic impulses and actions is indeed a constitutional crisis, the severity of which will

and those forces are not going back into the box, despite election results. The battle between our better angels and our worst demons will be the spiritual battle of our political life for the unforeseeable future.

But along with this being a political and moral emergency, this is also a faith crisis—the response of faith communities to this crisis will define the meaning of faith for generations to come, including whether future generations will even want to be people of faith.

THE DANGER THAT the president will plunge us into a constitutional crisis to avoid accountability for corrupt and likely criminal acts is very real. Hope—in a secular, political sense—feels awfully hard to muster these days, especially for people the president and his supporters have consistently marginalized and attacked, such as people of color, women, immigrants, Muslims, LGBTQ people, and many others.

Yet, as Christians, our outlook should not be based on the evidence of the world and current events. We shouldn't look to election results or other political events for our hope. Rather, we should look to a God who became flesh and lived among us, and bestowed upon us justice, mercy, grace, and, yes, hope.

The hope of Jesus coming, again and again, does not, of course, absolve us from our responsibility to act here and now to further God's vision for justice "on earth as it is in heaven." Indeed, that is a consequence of waiting for Jesus. The Incarnation and resurrection tell us that our hope is never in vain, even when things seem darkest. I often say, paraphrasing Hebrews 11:1, that "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change."

Faith and hope are vividly depicted in a beautiful metaphor in J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. When Sam and Frodo are in the depths of the land of Mordor and things seem their most hopeless, Sam is keeping watch in the night and looking at the dark and ominous sky:

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star



twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach.

This image has a special resonance as we look forward to Advent and Christmas. Tolkien, himself a devoted Catholic who helped bring C.S. Lewis to Christian faith, is telling us that while each of us must in his or her own time struggle for what is right and confront what is wrong, even in the face of seemingly hopeless odds, we should nevertheless always remember that the "light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). Or, as my friend Tony Campolo puts it, "We know how the story ends." ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

The Incarnation and resurrection tell us that our hope is never in vain, even when things seem darkest.

depend, in part, on whether our institutions and structures, in the wake of the midterm elections, will hold the executive accountable, or not.

This is also a moral crisis regarding whether our "better angels," as Abraham Lincoln put it, or our worst demons, as Donald Trump seems to evoke every day, will finally triumph. As they say, the jury is still out on that. Trump has opened a Pandora's box of white racial and male resentment, fear, and hatred,



Filipe Samed

By Julie Polter

A Whirlwind in a Wildfire

Revenge fantasies, however justified they may feel, are not the same as God's righteous anger.

THE FALSEHOODS are so thick, the hypocrisies so outrageous, the corruption so rife, the processes so broken that you don't know if you trust anyone anymore. The vulnerable are mocked or torn from their parents' arms. Men in expensive suits say "Lord, Lord," like they own air and mineral rights to the Most High. But their God, the one you thought—if but reluctantly—that you shared, is no god you recognize.

How can the pieces ever be put back together, the damage undone? What is gospel truth now?

A knot of self-righteous rage, tangled inextricably with despair, owns your gut. The accusing thought comes that you're complicit. You've not done enough; you've saved no one. Guilt is the final straw. A voice not quite your own yet completely your own snarls: "Burn. It. Down."

It is dangerous to play with fire, even metaphorical fire. You don't want to hurt anyone, you just want sneering oligarchs off their thrones. (Nonviolently. Really.) You don't want all institutions destroyed, only some, and the rest just under new management. Your anger is not inherently a bad thing (there is much to be angry about), but it tends to turn on itself and then lash out unexpectedly. A whirlwind in a wildfire.

A voice whispers: "Burn it down" means

down, to the foundation. Why do you think you will be the first human to control the flames?

Revenge fantasies, however justified they may feel, are not the same as God's righteous anger. Your fire is not God's fire.

ADVENT. THE ENDING that is the beginning of the ending that will be the beginning. When we ponder the second coming of Jesus before we celebrate the first. The through line between "now" and "not yet" draws taut. Serious scriptural firepower is unleashed. There are worlds about to end.

The prophet Malachi rolls into town on the second Sunday of Advent. A prophet

There will be plenty of fire to go around, everyone restored to show-room condition, that new-soul smell wafting on the breeze.

riled up by false worship, arrogance, and the exploitation of the weak.

The passage initially seems promising: "The Lord whom you seek ... in whom you take such delight—look! Here he comes." Then it turns sharply: "Who can endure the day when he comes? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire, like the soapmaker's lye" (3:1-4).

Equal-opportunity fire? Even for those white-hot with righteous fury?

You look more closely at the first verse. Is that a bit of sarcasm? The Lord "in whom you take *such delight*." You sense a divine eye-roll.

There will be plenty of fire to go around. The kind of burn that hurts like hell, leaving only our faithful elements purified and precious. A scrub-down to get at the stubborn grime under our nails. Everyone restored to show-room condition, that new-soul smell wafting on the breeze.

When the tumult and ash of Advent settles, we are left waiting and watching—intent on the promise that God will one day make all things new. We put down our matches and look to bear witness to God's fire instead. We speak of God's truth in a time of lies. We say, "I believe you." We bind up the wounded. We throw our bodies and reputations into the oppressive cogs. We burn with righteous anger, as we

should, but also with love beyond understanding. We are not consumed.

Jesus has come, gone, abides, and will come again, as an infant, as ruler of all. The Holy Spirit's flames are shut up in our bones. In the "now" and the "not yet," coals glow, sometimes flaring, sometimes almost spent and cold. But fire endures. ■

Julie Polter is a senior associate editor of Sojourners.

Our Mission

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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By Emilie Teresa Smith

Listening from Below

Celebrating 50 years of liberation theology—and St. Romero of the Americas.

“THE CRY OF THE POOR rises to the heavens!” With one phrase, proclaimed at a conference of Catholic bishops in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, history changed in Latin America.

Fifty years ago, the “princes of the church”—with the support of Pope Paul VI, who opened the gathering, and embodying the renewal of Vatican II—agreed to dethrone themselves.

A “preferential option for the poor,” they said, would lead the renewed Catholic Church.

Bishops and priests, religious sisters and brothers, began working to change the historic

structures of inequality and abuse that had existed in Latin America since the 15th-century invasion of the rapacious Spaniards. Faith was no longer held captive by the educated and powerful elites; now laypeople were empowered to make their faith their very own bread and Word. Christian base communities emerged. Theologians got busy listening “from below.”

A name was attached to the Medellín movement with the arrival of Father Gustavo Gutierrez’ groundbreaking book *A Theology of Liberation*. Liberation theology, rooted in the economically and politically oppressed, became the first modern theological movement to emerge in the Catholic Church outside of Europe.

In August, people from 15 countries on four continents regathered in Medellín to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the birth of liberation theology. Catholic priests and Protestant pastors, lay people and bishops, and Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities gathered to reflect on the past and to look forward.

While liberation theology

became part of a powerful movement for freedom, it was not universally embraced by the old, firmly embedded ecclesial and secular power structures. The elite classes, which tightly controlled most countries then—and still do now—had no intention of relinquishing their privilege. State structures viciously attacked the emerging liberation movements. Deadly repressive

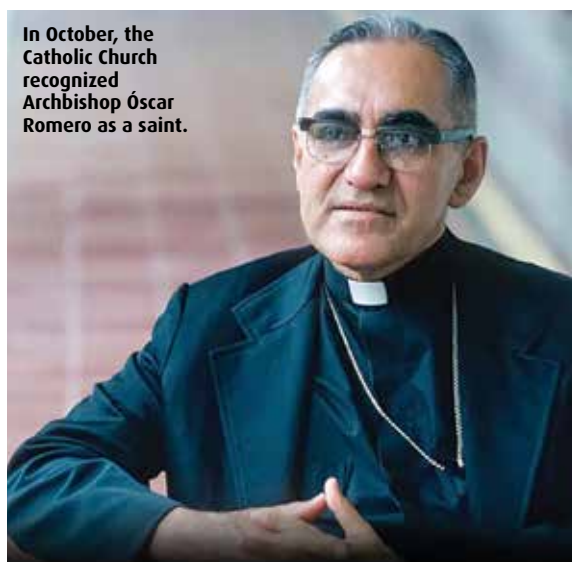
forces targeted several bishops present at the 1968 conference who advanced the “preferential option for the poor,” linked evangelization and economic development, and forged faith to social justice. Some

bishops, notably the recently canonized St. Oscar Romero of El Salvador, along with many priests and religious brothers and sisters and tens of thousands of lay people, were killed by repressive regimes in Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil, Colombia, and elsewhere.

Those who gathered in Medellín this year examined the original document through the method of “see, judge, act” developed by Christian base communities. The original document made no mention of the prophetic role of women or the foundational contribution of the rich cosmologies

In 1968 at Medellín, the “princes of the church” agreed to dethrone themselves.

In October, the Catholic Church recognized Archbishop Óscar Romero as a saint.



Facebook/Beatificación De Monseñor Óscar Arnulfo Romero

From the Archives

December 2007

A Simple Christmas

IN THE PAST, the bulk of my Christmas shopping has usually been done between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. on Christmas Eve.



There's something about waking up on the day before Christmas in a sheer panic that propels me straight into the open arms of every electronics, sporting goods, and department store within a 10-mile radius. While my family spends the morning sipping coffee, making red velvet cake, and cutting intricate little gift tags, I've spent the day with folks I've come to recognize as my extended family—a dysfunctional, wild-eyed bunch with a procrastination problem.

This year, however, will be different. Last January my husband and I embarked on an adventure inspired by newspaper coverage of the Buy-Nothing-New Year covenant groups forming across the country. Together with a few friends from work, we agreed to spend an entire year living more simply by not buying anything new, with exceptions made for consumables (food, toilet paper, etc.), replacement parts such as water filters, and intangible services such as a night at the theater. We've found the best thrift stores, traded items with friends, and managed to give birth to our first child without ever stepping foot in a Babies R Us.

I've never been particularly good at sticking to spiritual disciplines, but I've come to recognize this year of living simply as a kind of living prayer. ... I've come to cherish the feeling of having enough, of not needing or wanting more stuff. ■

Amy Ard lived in Atlanta with her 5-month-old daughter and husband when this article appeared.

of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, some of whom are reclaiming Abya Yala as the pre-conquest name for the region. The “enemies of life” still proliferate, they observed. And 50 years ago, the world was not aware of catastrophic climate change.

Where Christians have been involved in challenging injustice, defending vulnerable communities, and defending the Earth itself—directly implementing the principles of the Medellín conference—they have met crushing violence from predatory elites.

Now, Christians faithful to the incarnation of the God of love in the figure of a

humble carpenter from Nazareth are called to radical nonviolent actions in defense of creation and her creatures. This is the prophetic affirmation of Medellín for today: We follow a crucified and resurrected God, who will always bear a preferential option for the littlest ones. And we are grateful for the witness of St. Romero of the Americas to guide us. ■

Emilie Teresa Smith is a Canadian Anglican priest and theologian living in Vancouver, British Columbia. She is co-president of the Óscar Romero International Network in Solidarity with the Peoples of Latin America.

By Kate Ott

Shouldn't We Just Trust Christian Leaders?

Power is dynamic, so accountability should be too.

INCIDENTS OF SEXUAL misconduct in faith communities shine a spotlight on issues of power in congregations.

As important as recognition, prevention, and intervention are for ending sexual violence, faith communities have significant work to do on routine, everyday abuses of power.

The way faith communities distribute labor and educational responsibilities, as well as committee assignments and financial obligations, often fall along stereotypical gender, class, and age lines. These mundane misuses of power in church settings desensitize us to recognizing serious boundary violations when they occur.

Faith communities assess power differentials and concurrent risks to determine policies that provide checks and balances on power imbalances. For example, individuals who are ordained have more power because of their level of education, professional status, and theological notions of representing God or a tradition. Adults have more power than youth because of social experience, economic means, or physical ability. In these dyads, power accrues to the individual with more resources. This is generally a solid starting point when assessing power differentials and then minimizing risk by creating practices of accountability. However, we rarely occupy one identity or one role when participating in congregations.

In Jeanne Hoeft's essay “Pastor/

Parishioner Relationships” in *Professional Sexual Ethics*, she defines power as “the capacity for influence.” Following current literature, Hoeft reflects on the *fluidity* of power. Power is a “dynamic,” not a set quantity.

For example, in a committee meeting where all members vote on the church budget (including the pastor's salary), Hoeft writes, “power is more evenly distributed than when the pastor is visiting one of those committee members in the hospital.” In one community, among the same group of people, power shifts based on the context, purpose, and roles of the individuals. When we assume power dynamics are static instead of dynamic, we miss nuances of privilege, influence, and control.

Routine aspects of congregational life can model healthy boundaries—guidelines and opportunities to assess power dynamics, such as systems of checks and balances.

For example, many congregations have a system that regulates offerings from the point of collection, to the bank deposit, to expenditures. No singular person oversees the whole process. Lay members take the collection, appointed members count and store the money in a safe, the treasurer makes the deposit and cross-references the amount with an independent group of counters. The treasurer and committee develop a budget and keep track of spending. These steps and the number of people involved represent a dynamic and relational

use of power for accountability.

Some might feel such a fastidious approach is excessive. Shouldn't we trust people and rely on them to be Christian? Yes—and trustworthy Christians welcome policies and procedures that are transparent, effective, and appropriate. When we think we do not need boundaries, we are most vulnerable to causing harm. In his book *Just Ministry*, Richard Gula cautions clergy to “resist the temptation to hide behind the status of ‘religious vocation’ to avoid fulfilling the sometimes heavy demands of moral character, duties, and responsibilities of the pastoral relationship that brings a professional dimension to our vocation.”

Congregations are both communities and workplaces. We too often eschew responsibilities related to a workplace—such as job descriptions, human resource policies, and volunteer training practices. Nuanced attention to relational dynamics and practices that seek to balance power differentials allow us to deal with daily issues, such as conflict in meetings.

In cases of sexual misconduct, most policies have more than one person to whom one may report an incident because the abuser might be included in the reporting mechanism. Checks and balances in the claim process may include engaging an outside third party to ensure healthy boundaries and clarity of roles and responsibilities, and to prevent personal, institutional, or theological bias from interfering with the process.

The most significant and difficult assessment of power differentials and proper implementation of checks and balances is the check on our socialized sexism in cases of sexual misconduct, especially bias against believing a female or child trauma survivor. We balance that bias through education and listening to the most vulnerable in our midst.

As faith communities practice healthy power relations in low-stake interactions, we may more adeptly implement sexual-violence prevention and handle intervention for ourselves and as a model for the wider society. ■

Kate Ott (kateott.org) is an assistant professor of Christian Social Ethics at Drew Theological School in Madison, N.J., and the author of Christian Ethics for a Digital Society.



JP Keenan

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WORLD



Social worker Lalropuii Chawngthu volunteers every morning at the opioid substitution therapy room in a Presbyterian church in Lungdai, India.

Sarita Santoshini

Distributors of Healing

The opioid crisis is a global epidemic, and churches around the world are struggling to respond. “We went from door to door urging users to give up drugs in the name of God, but it never worked,” said Lalchawimawia Kiangte, a minister in Lungdai, a village in the northeastern Indian state of Mizoram. “So we decided to seek out any other method that might help.” Today, Lungdai Presbyterian Church is one of Mizoram’s 17 distribution points for buprenorphine—an opioid provided as a substitute to illicit drugs, also known as Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST). Read more at sojo.net/mizoram.

QUOTED

“I think this fear of spiritual rejection is what keeps many evangelical Christians loyal to Trump.”

— Nancy Hightower
on theologies that emphasize a fear of hell
sojo.net/hell

NEWS



A Telos Holy Land tour group

Come and See

Thanks in part to organizations such as the Telos Group, a U.S. nonprofit that facilitates multi-narrative pilgrimages to the Holy Land, U.S. evangelicals are building relationships with Israelis and Palestinians—and rethinking their uncritical support of the Israeli state.

As Teresa Casale recently told Jasper Vaughn for Sojourners online, it’s hard to understand the current context of Israel/Palestine “until you see and feel that for yourself.” Casale, who leads trips to the Holy Land, explained that “many Christians operate under the assumption that this conflict has been going on for ‘thousands of years.’ The reality is that this current situation has existed for decades, not centuries, and it is solvable. The land of the Bible is a living, breathing place that exists *now*. Real people live real lives there that are filled with suffering caused by geo-political decisions in which we as Americans are implicated.”

But “trips like those organized by the Telos Group walk a fine line,” explains Vaughn. “How can U.S. Christians become educated, passionate, and mobilized by the injustices in the Holy Land in person while making sure they are not indulging in ‘conflict tourism’ or using their outsized influence poorly?”

The answer? Americans need “to humanize the people who live there, to listen to their stories, and to learn from the peacemakers,” said Telos’ Jordan Wilson. “These are the people who show us all the way out of intractable conflict by casting vision for a sustainable future built on mutuality.”

Read more at sojo.net/pilgrimage.

*How Do We React When We
Find Refugees on Our Doorstep?*

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KENT ANNAN is director of humanitarian and disaster leadership, where he provides leadership to the MA program in Wheaton College's Humanitarian Disaster Institute. He is cofounder of Haiti Partners and author of *Slow Kingdom Coming*.



A Donald Trump supporter prays at a campaign rally in Ocala, Fla.

Mike Segar/Reuters

An Open Letter to White Evangelicals

IN 1983, I walked down an aisle at a Sunday evening church camp meeting in Cape May, N.J., and bent my brown knees at the altar. I had spent a year learning the basics of our faith. I had done walk-a-thons and sing-a-thons as part of a small youth group in a local Wesleyan church. I had sat through countless altar calls at Christian concerts. But now I was ready to surrender to Jesus. It was glorious when it happened:

At best, many of you have been silent.

Surrendering to a relationship with him was an act of freeing myself from fear. I trusted Jesus with my life.

Freedom from fear means freedom to love—to love like the Good Samaritan loved—without limits and concern for self. This kind of love is witness. It requires belief that Jesus' way is, indeed, *the* way, that Jesus' words are the truth and will lead to good life. To love someone of another ethnicity, for example, as extravagantly as the Samaritan loved, one must believe that Jesus has got our back when we follow his lead.

But over the past five years, since the slaying of Michael Brown, your white evangelical and political allegiances have revealed the limits of

your love and the depths of the profound fear that drives you.

The reveal began when you responded to Black Lives Matter protests of officer-initiated slayings of unarmed black men, women, and children across the country with the patronizing corrective: "All lives matter!" You missed the point: Yes, all lives matter to God, but the lack of indictments and convictions have revealed that black lives do not matter to our "justice" system.

Then you elected Donald Trump and continue to be his most loyal base.

Politics is the conversations we have and the decisions we make about how we should live together. You have claimed that your political support for Trump is not a reflection of your own beliefs about race but is about issues such as abortion—appointing more conservative judges to the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. But PRRI and *The Atlantic* have revealed a deeper reason for your support. When their 2018 Voter Engagement Survey asked many of you if you believed the nation would be better or worse off when people of color are in the majority, 52 percent of you responded that the impact would be

"mostly negative." It seems many of you want a white nation.

It is no wonder, then, that so many of you have supported Trump with unwavering loyalty. He promised you the golden crown, the Supreme Court, the key to winning your culture war and winning back white supremacy. He is holding up his end of the deal—and so are you.

At best, many of you have been silent. At worst, many of you have led cheers for Trump as he separated families and left babies on floors in cages, removed protection from refugees, threatened people of color through changes in the courts and policing system, removed protection from poor communities and communities of color threatened by toxic dumping on their lands, proposed removing funding from poor schools, and tried hard to remove health insurance from 30 million struggling individuals.

White evangelical church, *this* is your witness. You have become evidence of forces hell-bent on subordinating people of color and crushing the image of God. Repent and believe the gospel. ■

Lisa Sharon Harper, author of *The Very Good Gospel*, is founder and president of FreedomRoad.us.



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Recentering Spirituality

**Creating space for activism, mysticism, and healing
by and for people of color.**

an interview with **TERESA P. MATEUS**
of the Mystic Soul Project

When Teresa P. Mateus attended gatherings on Christian contemplative spirituality, she often didn't see herself reflected in the spiritual practices "centered in whiteness" that she found emphasized there.



She yearned for spiritual resources that drew on the experiences of people of color—and out of that yearning, the Mystic Soul Project was born.

Mateus is a graduate of the New York University School of Clinical Social Work and the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation and author (under the name Teresa B. Pasquale) of two books on recovery after trauma, including *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma*. Da'Shawn Mosley, assistant editor of *Sojourners*, spoke with Mateus in August about how the Mystic Soul Project brings healing and spiritual nourishment to people on the margins.



Tahirah Whittington performs
at the January Mystic Soul Project
conference in Chicago.
Photos by Darren Calhoun

DA'SHAWN MOSLEY: Tell us about the Mystic Soul Project.

TERESA P. MATEUS: Our basic mission is activism, mysticism, and healing centered around the life experiences of people of color. We create space for conversations, relationship building, practices, and other programming that have a people-of-color perspective and allow many to reclaim ancestral practices that have been abandoned or erased by Western traditions.

How did the project get started? The Mystic Soul Project was born from my deep yearning for a contemplative life into which I could integrate my identity as a person of color. I wondered how healing is inherent in our spirituality and how the action and activism that people of color do is grounded in their spirituality and healing, and I wanted space to explore those questions.

But gatherings on Christian contemplative spirituality are dominated by white, wealthy people who are baby boomers or older. That doesn't represent all the peo-

ple the week I spent doing trauma care at Standing Rock. That environment was so crafted and curated as being unapologetically Lakota, unapologetically Indigenous, and adamant that marginalized voices would be heard and the call on people who weren't marginalized was to be quiet.

I had never been in a space where people did that firmly, but with love. And so, for me, that became something I wanted to do at our gatherings.

So everyone who facilitated any piece of programming was a person of color. We had both a person-of-color and a non-person-of-color spirit-care team to provide attendees spiritual direction. We had a creative arts space that was all about projects that allowed people to express themselves, their identity, and their wholeness, and we also had programming, from morning to night each day, that focused on embodied



We received 425 applications. I read every single one and realized that the application itself was having a profound effect on people, many of them saying things like, "Just finding this website and knowing that this conference is going to happen is the thing I've been waiting for my whole life." Even people as far away as New Zealand and Canada expressed that sentiment.

At the conference, elders—elders of

Gatherings on Christian contemplative spirituality are so dominated by white, wealthy people, and that doesn't represent all the people yearning for contemplative spirituality.

ple yearning for contemplative spirituality. In speaking with other people of color, I realized that my deep yearning was more universal than I thought, because it's difficult to worship in dominant white spaces with spiritual practices centered in whiteness.

I thought about what people of color need from a conference. I realized that we go to a lot of places that help us with our brand, give us information, and train us and equip us to do things. But what would it be like to go to a conference that is mostly about nurturing and pouring into our soul? I thought about this and got to work with others to make the vision a reality. Since we have few examples of what it looks like to decolonize and deconstruct societal paradigms that overlook people of color, I spent a long time trying to figure out how to do that.

What shaped your vision for these gatherings? Some of the inspiration and permission to be focused on people of color and Indigenous traditions—in all of the meanings of "Indigenous"—came from

healing: acupuncture, Reiki, and massage.

For our workshops, we had a rule of life, a tenet of co-teaching and co-learning. We believe there's not one person who has all the wisdom, but rather we're all carrying individual wisdom: How do we combine that knowledge and share it with each other?

At the conference, we also had a contemplative practice space, in which we did guided meditations and allowed time for people to just sit and be. We also held conversations, for people who are external processors and wanted that space.

But most of the conference was dedicated to nurturing the parts of ourselves—this especially pertains to people of color—that we forget to take care of.

How were the attendees chosen? We had a six-month application process, wanting to make sure that we were inviting people who were ready for what we wanted to do, because we intentionally wanted to deconstruct and decolonize paradigms of power and reorganize them to prioritize people of color.

color—said to me, "I have wanted a space like this to exist for so long." That was amazing to hear, that we were providing space for people to allow all the parts of their self to come together and not be suppressed.

What obstacles have stood in the way of the Mystic Soul Project's growth? Because of our focus on spirituality, activism, and healing, rather than just one of those areas, we connect to a multitude of spaces, but don't fit into any one of their quintessential boxes. That makes funding more difficult than if we were of a specific denomination, faith practice, or kind of activism.

Healing fits in the funding box for mental health, but because we're not providing exact, in-person counseling services, we don't necessarily fit into that box. And grants for activism are usually given based on what your campaign is, what your target is. There's not a widespread awareness yet that healing in movements is just as necessary as what the movements themselves are doing.

Also, the idea of reconnecting to



Mystic Soul Project gatherings provide space for people to “allow all the parts of their self to come together and not be suppressed.”

traditions of your ancestry and letting go of Western traditions is fairly new. Many people are unaware that Western Christianity’s initial function was demonizing practices that were ancestral to people of color—colonizing faith. They don’t know that sometimes when they talk about decolonizing spaces and deconstructing white supremacy in the context of their Christian faith, their language is still language of colonization and still demonizes ancestral practices. Revealing that to people, so they will want to invest in deep examination of ancestral practices, is a lot of work.

How does the Mystic Soul Project address intersectionality?

Trying to center the lives and ancestry of people who have been decentered and marginalized in multiple ways is maybe the hardest thing I’ve ever tried to do. In attempting this, my fellow organizers and I didn’t get everything right. When you’re trying to lift, create space for, and have sensitivities around people’s diverse identities, there’s constantly room to improve.

When we asked people to attend the conference, we made it clear that, besides being centered on people of color, we are also spiritually inclusive. We recognize the abundance of spiritual identities and encouraged attendees to not make assumptions that everyone else was Christian just because several Christians they recognized were in attendance. Whenever I mentioned God, I said, “The divine force that *I* call

God,” because that may not be indicative of other people’s spirituality. The balance is being authentic to each of our specific traditions while also being invitational.

In addition to being multireligious, the Mystic Soul Project is also queer- and trans-inclusive and inclusive of the disability community. Before anyone arrived at

identity, the name badges we provided them allowed them to select the gendered or gender-neutral pronouns they identified with and write down an alternative designation.

But despite all that, we have farther to go in our inclusion. There are lots of parts we need to expand to make the space inherently and authentically intersectional, not just an idea of intersectionality but rather lived and breathed.



What’s ahead for the project?

We’ve started a podcast and a virtual teaching series—a web series of various teachings but also conversations. We also want to build smaller community groups around the country, creating space for people to have dialogues about different ways of healing, spiritual connection, and activism and bring those things together in a people-of-color-centered way. Our next conference, in June 2019, will be space for

the [January] conference, we were intent on addressing accessibility issues and making the bathrooms gender-neutral.

There’s no space I can think of that prioritizes and lifts all those identities. There are places that are people-of-color centered but aren’t purposefully queer- and trans-inclusive, and there are spaces that are queer- and trans-inclusive but there are barely any people of color involved with the space.

At least half of our board is queer. At the conference, we gave queer and trans people the floor to speak. To make sure that conference attendees were sensitized to gender

people to meet face-to-face—wisdom is in community, the history, personhood, and fullness of everyone who shows up.

The night before our January gathering, we had an advance party in a school we were using as space for the conference; we called it “Mystic Soul Prom.” It was just everyone dancing, having the prom they never got to have as themselves, in all their fullness.

Watching all these people of color dancing, having a 100-percent moment of joy, I thought, “This is it. This community is born.” The community always existed, but its members just needed to find each other. ■



Shutterstock

Dear White Santa (the sequel)...

I'M TOO OLD, and so are my children, to set out cookies and milk for you. But I'm still hopeful enough to write you another letter.

Last year, with all the earnestness I could muster, I asked you for a white people intervention—many white progressive and evangelical Christians in the same room for a cleansing flood of white tears, some deep breathing and healing prayer, and time to plan to dismantle white supremacy from the inside.

But I have not received word that an intervention took place. I assume

Rich Asians. Several movies released this year were rich with representation, and I think of them akin to the Twelve Days of Christmas, little gifts spread out through the year to divvy up joy in the midst of knowledge that Flint, Mich., remains without clean water, almost 500 migrant children remain separated from their parents (while almost 325 of those children's parents have already been deported), and the president attempted to tweet away the death of almost 3,000 Americans in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. (By the way, White Santa, I have never spent so much money seeing first-run movies in the theater multiple times, and I know I am not alone. If you had anything to do with the theaters that have fancy seats, cash bars, and gourmet food, my white friends thank you. I like the seats too, but I still bring in my own food and drink.)

I ask, once again, for a white people intervention. I'm still hoping my white siblings who consider themselves woker than the 81 percent will gather their people and intervene in subversive and obvious ways. And if you, White Santa, don't want to play

favorites, you can send invitations globally, because colonialism is still so 21st century.

Since I'm also still working on raising my voice, I'll go ahead and add to my Christmas 2018 wish list. Can you convene a complicated, intersectional conversation on patriarchy and its symbiotic relationship to white supremacy? Maybe this ethnically and generationally diverse group of siblings could meet a few times and come up with a statement or white paper to set some new ground rules for engagement as the white people intervention group seeks to dismantle white supremacy. I realize you may need to get the help of the Committee of Elves of Diversity and Inclusion; they did such a great job with the movies. There is so much potential there, and if you have any connections to White Jesus, this could be the best Christmas ever.

Thank you for your consideration. ■

Kathy Khang is a writer, speaker, and coffee-drinker in the north suburbs of Chicago and author of *Raise Your Voice: Why We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up*.



Colonialism is so 21st century.

invitations to it went out or it got canceled, postponed, or taken over by the announcement of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy's retirement. (Was that supposed to be a Christmas-in-summer gift?)

Thank you, however, for putting together the Committee of Elves of Diversity and Inclusion, who brought us the gifts *Black Panther*; *A Wrinkle in Time*; *Love, Simon*; *Ocean's 8*; *Sorry to Bother You*; *BlacKkKlansman*; *Crazy Rich Asians*; *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*; *Searching*; and the announcement of a sequel to *Crazy*

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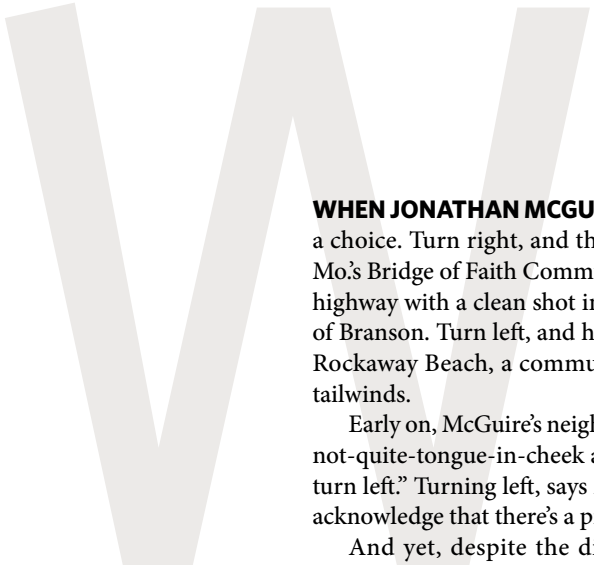
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MILLER COUNTY SHERIFF AND JAIL





Just Don't Call It 'Social Justice'

In rural communities, churches engage in practical and compassionate ministries to empower others for the common good.

by **BRAD ROTH**

Pastor Chip Sanders and his son Elijah deliver Christmas dinner to 911 dispatchers, jail personnel, and ambulance crews in Miller County, Mo.

WHEN JONATHAN MCGUIRE leaves his driveway, he has a choice. Turn right, and the pastor of Rockaway Beach, Mo.'s Bridge of Faith Community Church will hit the state highway with a clean shot into the thriving tourist mecca of Branson. Turn left, and he'll find himself in downtown Rockaway Beach, a community left behind in Branson's tailwinds.

Early on, McGuire's neighbors gave him some sardonic, not-quite-tongue-in-cheek advice. They told him: "Never turn left." Turning left, says McGuire, means "you have to acknowledge that there's a problem."

And yet, despite the difficulties, McGuire and his congregation have turned left into the heart of the uncomfortable messiness of poverty, but also into the heart of their community.

They're not alone. I went looking for congregations living a vision for biblical social justice along the unique contours of rural America. I spoke to leaders seeking a just and hopeful future for their communities and discovered stories of people who are building relationships, advocating for the common good, and agitating for culture change.

Mobilized by love of neighbor

The economic reality of rural America is diverse. Pockets of robust growth exist within driving distance of vibrant cities and gorgeous natural amenities. Yet many towns face profound challenges. They're communities fractured by generational poverty, addiction, and—perhaps surprisingly in breadbasket regions—food insecurity.

In places like this, it's often the rural church that takes on the role of change agent. Social justice runs deep in the scriptures, given voice by the Old Testament prophets, embodied in Jesus' life, and lived out in the upside-down economics of the early church (see Micah 6:8; Luke 4:18; Acts 2:44-45). And yet, as Jordan Rasmussen with the Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA) in Lyons, Neb., explains, social justice "can be an off-putting term for rural residents."

In part, the disconnect is a factor of the national political environment. Rasmussen describes how, in her advocacy work with CFRA, she's found that rural people may vote and express approval for conservative candidates whose platforms include cutting the safety net. Yet, if you "go a layer down," people desire to see their communities thrive, and that desire is often expressed in the language of faith. It's love of neighbor that mobilizes rural folks, for instance, to "come to the legislature to testify about how [lack of] broadband is limiting their community's ability to grow."

If the way social justice commitments are described and encoded into political options plays out differently in the country than in urban or suburban areas, so too the mechanisms for change are differently inflected.

Take protest, for example. Protest can function as a potent prophetic lever in urban environments. Think of church leaders locking arms across Charlottesville, Va., in witness against racial injustice. Yet that type of protest

Brad Roth

"If you grow up thinking that Iberia is all that there is, then your view of the world is pretty small."

—Chip Sanders
pastor, Iberia, Mo.



Iberia First Assembly of God photos

band reopened a defunct Assemblies of God congregation in her hometown of Greenville, Mo. (population 485), she quickly discovered that she was in over her head.

"The 'industry' in our community is meth," says Henson. Logging has slowed, and area factories have been shuttered for years. Yet she says God laid Isaiah 58 on her heart, and with the prophet's passion to "loose the bonds of injustice ... and let the oppressed go free," Henson discovered a calling to reach out to folks struggling with the legacy of generational poverty and addiction. "We have grown our church from people who have been in prison, people who have been on drugs," says Henson. "God has changed my heart and opened my heart."

The budding congregation went from Friday evening youth meals and game nights to building a gym. They then decided to remodel an old hardware store and launch a coffee shop they call Jonah's Java. When people began donating household items and clothes, some women in the church had a vision for a thrift store. "You won't have to do a thing," they optimistically told Henson. Over time, receipts from the thrift store grew to fund around half of the church's budget. The thrift store expanded and added a food bank, and Jonah's Java branched out to launch Jonah's Journey, a Narcotics Anonymous group whose impact was recognized by the county courts and approved for fulfilling probation requirements.

Around 50 people gather for worship on Sunday



"We have grown our church from people who have been in prison, people who have been on drugs."

—Brenda Henson
pastor, Greenville, Mo.



morning, but Wednesday night is where the action is. Henson's congregation hosts a youth group after school, followed by a meal for the youth, gym time, and a youth worship service. At 7 p.m., there's another meal for the Jonah's Journey crowd, followed by their NA meeting.

Author and pastor Samuel Wells writes that "poverty is not primarily about money. It is about having no idea what to do and/or having no one with whom to do it." In other words: Poverty is about lack of imagination and community. Henson has discovered something similar. At the heart of the congregation's diverse outreach in the community lies a ministry of relationship building. Henson is a connector, reaching out to children through the school district, folks coming out of jail, and individuals dealing with addiction. "We just try to be available if someone in the community needs help," says Henson.

Henson is far from done with her work. She dreams of creating classes for people to learn trades and job skills. "We know that we've only scratched the surface," says Henson. "There are people in those hills, down those gravel roads, that need Jesus. That is our heart's desire: to reach people that have no hope and show them that there is hope."

Three bags of food

McGuire, the Southern Baptist pastor of Bridge of Faith Community Church, has taken a similar approach to ministry, starting a coffee shop, thrift store, and Wednesday evening youth ministry that draws more than 200 kids, many of them bused in by the church. McGuire has set his sights on changing the economic dynamics of the community. "Our goal is to try to create jobs," he says, because it's impossible to preach against selling drugs in the nearby tourist economy without finding alternative sources of income. The congregation has purchased an old resort that they call "The Village." With the help of mission trip volunteers and locals, they've been gutting the cabins with an eye to remodeling them as space for business incubation.

Food insecurity is a major issue in Rockaway Beach. There is no grocery store within walking distance. The congregation has responded by starting a community garden. They recently purchased a greenhouse where



At left, a young member of Iberia (Mo.) Assembly of God after helping assemble the weekly “plum packs,” filled with healthy snacks for Head Start students. Below, the church’s 5th grade class after collecting shoes for every child and teacher in the elementary school through a partnership with Rural Compassion.

they plan to grow lettuce and other leafy vegetables for the Branson tourist market, but also to supply their local food pantry.

McGuire’s congregation has been a catalyst for change within the wider community—one initially unwelcome by some, particularly in local government, because of the congregation’s opposition to riverboat gambling. They’ve operated not unlike the way the prophet Jeremiah imagined when he told the exiles in Babylon to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile” (29:7).



Perhaps the Bible suggests two models of community ministry: one modeled by Jeremiah and the other by Nehemiah. Congregations such as McGuire’s operate on the Jeremiah model, working from within the community, but as a subset with a distinct identity. In other rural areas, the church plays a role more like that of Nehemiah, “committed ... to the common good,” sharing a common culture and common faith with the wider community (Nehemiah 2:18). These are places where European immigrant communities arrived en masse. Whole communities with a shared faith migrated together—for instance, Mennonites from the Russian colonies or Lutherans from Scandinavia. They built churches as they’d been in the “old country” and organized schools and townships around them. The boundaries of the rural town matched the boundaries of the parish.

Breen Sipes, a Lutheran pastor serving a three-church parish in south central Nebraska, says that without Lutherans “there would be no social services here.” Her congregations are active in addressing local issues such as food insecurity through a backpack program that sends food home with hungry children. But Lutherans also played a key role in laying the foundations of the local culture of care, for instance by establishing nursing homes. Folks in Sipes’ congregations own the common good in a unique way, and they’re willing to dig deep to support it. “Even

when they’re nervous about themselves, they’re always pointing to someone else who needs help,” says Sipes. “Individual church budgets may have suffered because of low crop prices, but the mission work piece has not lost funding.”

Leaders in both models, in their very different contexts, see themselves as empowering others to work for the common good.

McGuire tells the story of a woman who asked for some help from the food pantry. “Why don’t you go look in your cabinets,” he told her. “Find the items you haven’t eaten, bring those down, and we’ll trade.” The woman showed up a short time later with three bags of food to donate. It turned out to be an inspired move, a lightbulb moment that catalyzed the woman’s own agency, involving her as a volunteer who would go on to serve others.

Sow hope, start a laundromat

Chip Sanders’ church had to undergo a paradigm shift. Like most congregations, the small church in the Ozarks of central Missouri measured its success by how many people showed up on a Sunday morning. With Sanders’ help, the congregation began to get a feel for mission in the community. It started with

Without
Lutherans
“there would
be no social
services here.”

—Breen Sipes
pastor, south central
Nebraska



Members of the Ministerial Alliance during its annual back-to-school prayer in support of Iberia schools

putting clothes on people’s backs.

Iberia is a blue-collar town of about 700 that specializes in cattle, turkey, and hog farming. Generational poverty and addiction mar the face of the community. Sanders describes how his congregation formed a partnership with the local school to help meet student needs. When school officials encounter a situation that prevents a student from succeeding, they call the church. Sanders’ congregation works to



"Our goal is to try to create jobs."

—Jonathan McGuire

pastor,
Rockaway Beach, Mo.

meet the need, always anonymously.

At some point, the church realized that many of the requests had to do with clean clothes: socks, underwear, a fresh shirt for an interview, even a suit for prom. It turned out that many people didn't have a washing machine or dryer, and there wasn't a laundromat within 20 miles—a significant obstacle to folks on limited income. Sanders talks about kids coming to school in dirty clothes, essentially using them until they wear out. That discovery

required a leap of middle-class imagination across the poverty line.

The church has responded by laying the groundwork for a laundromat, which will operate on a conventional pay model with the congregation assisting those who can't afford it. Recognizing the need for a laundromat was one step on the congregation's journey of seeing its ministry as directed primarily outside the walls of the church building. "Even if that doesn't make for explosive growth on Sunday morning," Sanders says, "it's more about loving people and reaching people that nobody wants to reach."

But Sanders doesn't just want to see his congregation meet needs in the community. He's much more ambitious. Sanders wants nothing less than wholesale culture change.

Sanders explains that he longs to "expand the vision that people have of the world" so that they can see possibilities, make changes, and succeed. "If you grow up thinking that Iberia is all that there is, then your view of the world is pretty small." He has no magic technique to make this happen. You "meet people one-on-one, build relationships with them, and show them that someone cares for them and is not judging them or looking down on them."

Changing culture requires changing hearts. Bobby Kennedy gave his celebrated "Ripple of Hope" speech on a visit to apartheid-mangled South Africa in 1966. In it, Kennedy spoke of the power of standing up for our ideals, how doing so "sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy



Bridge of Faith Community Church

The Next Generation of Rural Organizing

An interview with Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson is co-executive director of the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee, an organization founded in the 1930s as a "folk school" to train labor organizers throughout Appalachia and the South. In the 1950s, Highlander was an incubator for the civil rights movement, with trainings led by Septima Clark and Ella Baker. By the 1990s, the center supported anti-strip-mining battles in Appalachia and linked mountain organizers with anti-globalization efforts around the world. Today, Highlander draws on the strengths of immigrants, students, and other local leaders in the rural South to build popular education programs that advance cultural organizing for justice. Former Sojourners editorial assistant Faith Zamblé interviewed Henderson in July.

Faith Zamblé: How would you describe your work at the Highlander Center?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson: I describe it as a grand inheritance. I was 31 or 32 when I became the first black woman to be co-executive director of the Highlander Center. And I inherited 86 years of people's stories and experiences and movement legacy. But with that legacy comes a great responsibility to make sure that the Highlander Center isn't just a living museum, where people come to study what was; it should also be a place where people can learn how to do things now. It's living in the past, present, and future at the same time, every day, all day.

Why is it important to encourage the work of popular education? Popular education, to me, is useful for so many reasons, but the one that resonates with me most is that marginalized people get told every day we're just not enough, that we don't know enough, that we're not smart enough, that we don't have enough resources. One of my elders used to tell us before she passed, "We have everything we need in our bones." I think popular education—and participatory action research, in particular—and intergenerational organizing really prove it.



Bridge of Faith Community Church in Rockaway Beach, Mo., recently purchased an abandoned resort and is working to renovate the cabins into business spaces to provide jobs and opportunities for local citizens.

and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

It’s gospel language, whether or not Kennedy intended it as such. God draws our faintest acts of hope into God’s eschatological vision of resurrection. Each act holds the possibil-

ity of nudging systems, igniting change. It starts with our own transformation, our personal cultural shift as we commit to the “God of hope” who brings us to “abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13). Our inner hope ripples outward into the world.

Gregory Mastey, a priest serving a rural parish in the Catholic diocese of St. Cloud, Minn., says that hope shapes the “spirit of the farmer and rural people. They keep going no matter what.”

While some parishes have a dedicated point person for working with folks in need, Mastey prefers to be on the front lines, in direct contact with those coming to the parish

for help. He speaks in terms of solidarity, pairing financial assistance with spiritual counsel. Mastey’s parish lies deep in dairy country, and many farmers find themselves caught between the rock and a hard place of high input costs and low milk prices. “How do we get them out of this place of despair,” he asks, “by showing them a gesture of love?”

Mastey is hopeful for the communities he serves. There may be less people in his parish now, he explains, but those who are there are deeply committed. They’re folks “who want their [way of] life to go on.”

The state of rural communities has become a justice issue, one which the church approaches out of her commitment to Christ, drawing from her deepest reserves of faith, hope, and love. We need all three, but perhaps right now we especially need hope. Christian hope, however disheveled, is always ultimately about being alive to the future that abounds in God. Hope is what gives us the courage to stand with God’s people at the rural margins—and wherever else God’s Spirit calls us. ■

***Brad Roth** is pastor of the West Zion Mennonite Church in Moundridge, Kan., and author of *God’s Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* (Herald Press). He blogs at DoxologyProject.com.*

“We have everything we need in our bones.”

Is there anything you wish people understood about Appalachia? Don’t sleep on us, because we’re actually not out here broke, busted, and disgusted. We’re winning with less resources than people have anywhere else in the United States. I would ask comrades who believe false narratives about what’s happening in the South—the stereotypes about us being backward and conservative—who that narrative serves. There’s so much beauty in being rooted in the South, and I would hate for folks that aren’t of the region to miss out on the power that’s there. It’s transformative.

who that narrative serves. There’s so much beauty in being rooted in the South, and I would hate for folks that aren’t of the region to miss out on the power that’s there. It’s transformative.

What role does your faith play in all of this? If all the pieces of my identity aren’t the lenses that I’m seeing through, then everything’s blurry. Faith is integral to the clarity within which I move on a second-to-second basis. I believe in an all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect Creator who believes we deserve to live our lives in the fullest dignity, with great joy, figuring this experiment out together and treating each other right while we do it. That impacts everything. Our beliefs that we can beat

the injustices of Donald Trump, the most powerful man in the world; that we can overthrow capitalism; that we can permanently uproot white supremacy? There ain’t nothing in that but faith. I’m grateful faith exists because I don’t know if we can build social justice movements that win without it. It’s the reason I’m nutty enough to think I should commit 18 hours a day to try to save the world.

What gives you hope? I don’t get into fights I don’t think I can win, and I think we can win this. What makes me believe that we can win, other than my faith, is my belief in the innate goodness of people. I believe that another world is necessary and very close because of the goodness of the people I get to work with every day. Marginalized people are some of the most brilliant, beautiful, incredible human beings I ever get to experience, and because they live, I’m going to see liberation in my lifetime. ■

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson



Jared Story



Seeing the World As It Should Be

**What does it take to move beyond civil rights
to a “more advanced democracy”?**

by ERICA HUNT • *illustration by* JON KRAUSE



Christians must move beyond

FREEDOM LANGUAGE HELPED ME to understand the grief and rage of Diamond Reynolds, the girlfriend of Philando Castile who witnessed his killing by a police officer in 2016.

Reynolds arrived at an early morning protest in St. Paul, Minn., a few hours after Philando's death. I heard her tell her story to a small crowd gathered on the street. Weeping, she shared how impossibly

stuck they felt in the 74 seconds between stopping their car for the police and Castile being shot multiple times.

Castile was never given a chance to show identification because he was shot as he reached for his wallet. He tried to tell the officer about his legally licensed handgun, but the screaming officer didn't seem to hear.

As Castile, Reynolds, and her young child ran errands on that summer night, civil rights laws did not protect their "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." The Civil Rights Act of 1964 allowed for Castile's employment at an elementary school and made legal their right to move through town. But these rights were not enough to protect Castile's freedom to live.

What is democracy?

As U.S. Christians and others fight to defend the space for justice created by civil rights movements of the past, another theme rises: What does freedom mean in America today? What does Reynold's rage require of people of faith?

At a minimum, it requires moving beyond a Sunday school version of democracy, as Southern Freedom Movement leader and historian Vincent Harding put it in 2002. "A solution of the present crisis will not take place unless ... [we] work for it. Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable ... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle. ... This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action," Harding said, quoting Martin Luther King's *Stride Toward Freedom*.

Words such as "democracy," "justice," and "rights for all" no longer mean what they used to. Brenda Salter McNeil, an Evangelical Covenant Church pastor in Seattle, wonders how to define democracy in the current context. "The entanglement of democracy with capitalism and nationalism makes it difficult to explore what democratic engagement means for Christ-followers today," said Salter McNeil in a phone interview.

If it is not as simple as "liberty and justice for all," what is it? Has American democracy ever existed

according to its ideals? What is the role today of Christians in advancing American democracy toward the "goal of justice"? What kind of struggle, sacrifice, and action will be required?

Incomplete or misleading historical narratives, white supremacy, and political hypocrisies that undermine our nation's stated values have led many to social resistance, insisting that America may only dare to call itself great when we realize a version of democracy that has not yet existed. Harding, who died in 2014, called this future version of democracy "advanced" to indicate the mature, creative energy needed to grow our understanding and expand our skill set for the changing needs of society.

"Democracy is like any other living organism," Harding said. "It either grows or it dies." To him, spiritual depth and maturity make a healthy society possible and allow societies to transcend impulses that turn difference into division or difficulty into apathy. Ecological metaphors are a reminder that democracy is not static and point to qualities such as interdependence, humility, patience, resiliency, and beauty. Harding championed these qualities as he elevated discourse around democratic engagement.

Avoiding 'ugly partisanship'

However, for some Christians the first question is whether to engage at all.

Greg Boyd, founder of Woodland Hills, a non-denominational megachurch in St. Paul, took up this fundamental question in his book *The Myth of a Christian Nation*. Fed up with pressure he received to influence his congregation toward certain candidates and political platforms during the 2004 campaign season, Boyd developed a thesis that shapes his view of civic engagement today. "I think it is important that Christ-followers remember that our unique focus is to advance God's kingdom, not nurture democracy," Boyd said.

Does it have to be either God's kingdom or democratic engagement? "The ideals of our democratic society overlap at significant points with our kingdom calling, meaning that the church can (carefully) forge partnerships with governmental agencies to accomplish tasks we all want to see accomplished, including working to bring 'liberty and justice for all,'" said Boyd. His caution stems from fear that Christians can too easily be sucked into ugly partisanship, cede spiritual power, and lose an ability to bear witness to the revolutionary message of the gospel.

Harding's antenna was particularly attuned to fear, which he believed comes in many disguises and has tenacious roots. For Christians committed

Sunday school democracy.

to thoughtful, advanced, democratic engagement, Harding's voice echoes others who invite us into the gritty, redemptive, and deeply spiritual work of shaping a democratic society that works better for more people.

Salter McNeil sees fear at the root of attitudes that undermine our ability to connect as humans. Fears "nourish a scarcity mindset that leads to building walls," she said. If, as Harding put it, the meaning of democracy is about "encouraging the capacities that are in us all to create living space, breathing space, acting space, and growing space for each other," then naming our fears is a prerequisite to building a version of U.S. democracy rooted in values that nurture rather than destroy.

Hospitality in the flesh

When the oldest Somali mosque in Minnesota burned to the ground in 2014, neighboring Trinity Lutheran Congregation decided to invite the Dar Al-Hijrah community to use Trinity's building for meetings and office space. Proximity made this arrangement work, but hospitality made it possible. Proximity and hospitality often go hand in hand with advanced-democracy practices. Harding once said, "Let us hear [our neighbors], so we may not answer unasked questions, love unreal persons, or bear witness to an unknown world."

Harding marveled at the possibilities generated by human connection and imagination. "It is now that we may be able to convey the stunning idea that dreams, imagination, vision, and hope are actually powerful mechanisms in the creation of new realities—especially when the dreams go beyond speeches and songs to become embodied—to take on flesh, in real, hard places," he said.

Binding the strong man

Harding used freedom language to describe what he and others were doing in the 1950s and 1960s—he had an aversion to describing their goal of social transformation as a "civil rights" movement. He chose to associate their vision with concepts of expansiveness, humility, and collaboration. Freedom is internally defined and externally affirmed. It is interdependent, ongoing, and best realized within relationships of equitably shared power. Rights, on the other hand, are granted (or not) by an external authority, making them possible only within a hierarchy of power. Rights are static, nonrelational, and externally imposed.

Civil rights are essential, but they do not guarantee Americans' ability to be free. On the other hand, extreme individualism and extreme personal rights

fuel division, as Harding warned, and undermine democracy. This direction leads to assuming that life is a zero-sum game between "us" and "them," categories Christians have often perpetuated and reinforced.

Michael McBride, a public theologian, activist, and pastor in the Bay Area, suggests that "Any reach for power should be through stewardship, seeing ourselves as stewards of the world and democracy on behalf of our Creator."

Christians should "show up as a compassionate presence" in our democracy, said McBride, and take the lead in a "radical reimagining of peacemaking." He believes this new imagination would include an honest assessment of economic, political, and law enforcement structures to gauge how well they are working for a broad range of Americans, especially poor people of color. McBride challenges the church to lead others to "see the world as it should be," not as it is.

Before offering a creative road forward, the church must lament and repent over complicity and perpetuation of white supremacy, which McBride considers the "strong man" of the American experience. Jesus says that the "strong man" must first be bound before his possessions can be taken, or before we can access the God-given potential of the world for redemption and freedom (Matthew 12). If the strong man is not bound, the promise of those under his control will never be realized. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection embodied and exemplified the kind of power needed to bind anything that gets in the way of the abundant life designed for all of creation. Jesus' power was sacrificial, tenacious, humble, creative, determined, and fed not by ego or fear but by complete trust in God's will and love.

To what degree are U.S. Christians tapping into that kind of power today?

For the sake of Philando Castile, Diamond Reynolds, and thousands of others, American Christians must move beyond Sunday school democracy to a more advanced version. Leaders in the Southern Freedom Movement were accused of naiveté, even weakness, for advocating this kind of power as the way to turn human hearts toward loving community. Today, louder, more fearful voices have drowned them out, making the church and democracy nearly unrecognizable. ■

What does freedom mean in America today?

Erica Hunt is a recent graduate of Kilns College in Bend, Ore., where she studied the life of Vincent Harding. She lives in St. Paul, Minn.



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Reach Out and Build Bridges

DOING DIVERSITY work in the Obama era felt like being not only part of the zeitgeist but the *telos*. History was bending toward an interfaith, multicultural future, and we were part of it. There was a long way to go toward the finish line, but the road was downhill and paved and our leader knew the way. There might be some disagreements in emphasis and in tactics, but generally speaking we believed we were heading to the same place.

Boy, how things have changed, both in the White House and in how we see the bend of history. The changes in the political sphere

How do we build a better world, not just resist the old one?

have had important reverberations in the diversity movement. It feels like there are two schools of diversity work these days.

On the one hand there is the Protect and Resist School. This type of diversity work emphasizes creating safe spaces for marginalized people (women, people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ folks, Muslims) and resisting the power structure in any way possible, from furious tweetstorms to Black Lives Matter protests to shouting down conservative speakers on campuses.

“We tried the Martin Luther King Jr. way with Barack Obama,” this school seems to say, “and you racists rejected him as a radical when really he was as moderate as any human being God ever created. You have the weapons of power; we have the weapons of resistance. To paraphrase James Baldwin and the Bible—no more water, the fire this time.”

The other school of diversity work can be called Reach Out and Build Bridges. This school is equally horrified by the racism of Trump world but doesn’t believe that all Trump voters are incorrigible racists. It leans in the direction of marginalized minorities, but it attempts to sympathize with all people—police officers and BLM protesters. “How do we convince more people?” this school wonders, not just how do we resist them.

Reach Out and Build Bridges types may participate in a protest or two, but they are also willing to work through institutional channels. They wonder, too, what comes after the protest? When the demonstrators from elsewhere leave Ferguson, what will the schools, the community organizations, and the police force look like? *Somebody* has to pay attention to that, after all.

In other words, how do we prepare for the day after the day after? How do we build a new and better world, not just resist the old one?

The tension taking place in the diversity movement right now is not new. One can see it in the civil rights era, between Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael type figures vs. Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis type figures. It existed in the struggle in South Africa, with Mandela and the African National Congress believing in a Rainbow Nation and more radical movements that called for throwing white South Africans into the sea.

Anybody who has been reading this column over the years can tell that I’m a Reach Out and Build Bridges type. I appreciate the keen sense of justice of the Protect and Resist school, but I think more bridge builders is the great need of the moment. I appreciate the fire of the early Malcolm X, but I prefer the inclusive progressivism of Jane Addams, Martin Luther King Jr., and Barack Obama—leaders who convey that in their world people of all backgrounds can thrive. ■



Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes about pluralism from his perspective as a Muslim American.

Psalm 46

Be still, and know that I am God.

Be still. Don't forget how the Earth shifted—
dinner plates with clean breaks in smashed boxes—
and lands became continents, broken homes.
Be still. Remember. Waters rushed between
the fissures, formed divides, shaped tongues, grew gods,
all holy, right. All lording over all.
Be still and wake early. Walk far. Alone.
But don't dwell on the once-solid landmass,
or want it sutured, seamless, with Eden
waters that filled cups, washed hair oils, armpits.
Be, still. Know, still. Endure in the broken.
We did just that when we were uterus
issue, when our hands flailed and tried to cling
to what we were made of. To still be one.

Jane Simpson is a poet and writer living in Atlanta. Her forthcoming book is Blessings of the Beasts (FutureCycle Press). Shutterstock





Worshippers blow bubbles on Easter Sunday—"to symbolize God's whimsical and abundant spirit"—in the parking lot sanctuary of Los Angeles First United Methodist Church.

Jackson Fleming



Here Is the Church, Here Is No Steeple

A Los Angeles church tore down its building and put up a parking lot—paving the way for a new economic model of ministry.

by HILLARY FRANCES

FOR HER FIRST FEW WEEKS as pastor of Los Angeles First United Methodist Church, Mandy McDow forgot to collect the Sunday morning offering. It wasn't because she was holding worship under a tent in a parking lot across from LA's 20,000-seat arena. It wasn't because a group of NBA All-Stars drove by and distracted her. The offering just didn't cross her mind.

"After my first service, people said, 'Where do we put our money?' I was like, 'Oh, I'm so sorry.' We didn't even bring out an offering box or anything. We had to go find it."

Los Angeles First United Methodist Church—known simply as "First Church"—owns the parking lot at the corner of Flower Street and Olympic Boulevard in LA's South Park neighborhood. On Sundays, the parking lot collects the members of one of LA's oldest Protestant churches, a crowd that includes people experiencing homelessness, Filipino immigrants, and LGBTQ folks. On Monday, the 100-spot parking lot goes to work holding cars for people rushing to meetings at the convention center by day and concerts and sporting events by night. "We have this amazing gift of a perpetually regenerating source of revenue that we never have to ask anyone—none of our

congregants—for another dime as long as we live," says McDow.

First Church operates on what McDow calls an "inverted business model"; instead of asking the congregation to support the church, McDow runs a business—the parking lot—to support the congregation. "Churches sit empty 80 to 90 percent of the

time, and they drain your resources, and then you're asking for money from people who desperately need their money for other things," says McDow. "Every church I have ever served had property issues. All the money goes back into the

facility, and you can't do ministry because you're too busy maintaining the temple."

McDow's business model is a response to a new economic reality for pastors. "I have worked in the church for 15 years and have watched as our current model of economic sustainability has collapsed. Members cannot tithe enough to support the operating expenses of the churches they attend. This has been a growing burden on pastors, and a terrible reality for ministries. I am of the generation that's inheriting a broken model that must be changed. We have to think about the economics of ministry in a new way."

"Every church I have ever served had property issues."

"We never have to ask any of our congregants for another dime as long as we live."



Pave paradise ...

Many pastors with similar convictions about economics opt to rent worship space somewhere else. But for McDow, owning land is an important way of being rooted in the community. "We're stakeholders," she explains. "We've been stakeholders for a long time. We pay taxes, we own property, and that buys us a voice. And it means that I want to keep having our worship services outside in the parking lot as long as we can."

Land ownership—and the power that comes with it—has been an important part of First Church's history. "There's an amazing story about an emancipated slave woman named 'Biddy' Mason who got to California with her slave owner and then realized it was a free state," says McDow. "So she marched herself up to the judge, got her emancipation papers, and started serving as a midwife, birthing all the wealthy white people's babies. Because she had been a midwife, she had enough money to purchase land in downtown LA. She built a house there, raised a family there, and started First African Methodist Episcopal Church there."

"Even though she had her own church, she attended First Church, my church, in the 1850s or 1860s, as an act of civil disobedience and defiance. Even if the city or government officials or police would try to bar her from attending, she would come anyway and was welcomed by First Church. She was an emancipated slave woman, who saw that her role was to push. She knew what it was like to be enslaved and to be free and to use her privilege as a free person to push against racial discrimination."

First Church was founded in 1853 when a Missouri preacher was sent on his horse to "go evangelize the 'rowdy and incorrigible southland' in Southern California," explains McDow. The church first met at the El Dorado Saloon, but when they outgrew it, they built their own building. In

Pastor Mandy McDow preaches in a tent that is erected each Sunday in an LA parking lot.

1921, they upgraded their building to what McDow calls "a monstrosity of a church, a quarter of a city block,

the first megachurch in Southern California. The church swelled to 6,000 members." The church's heyday ended in the 1970s as many of the congregation's white and Filipino residents moved to the suburbs.

Membership dwindled, and the church was forced to sell its building, to the city's gas company. They bought an office building at Olympic Boulevard and Flower Street, retrofitted it to meet their needs for a while, and when they couldn't afford the maintenance, they razed it, paved the surface, and started selling parking.

Bishops and blackbelts

Like those before her, McDow came to First Church looking for a place to disrupt the norms of worship. Recently divorced and equipped with skills from previous appointments to minister on the edges of her denomination's political comfort zone, McDow asked her leadership for an appointment that would allow her to do more "radical social justice advocacy work."

"I went to my district superintendent and said, 'I feel really clear that God is calling me to do a new thing and that the church is changing.' I started writing a lot about ecclesiology and the nature of the church and I was frustrated with maintaining a building," says McDow. When she later told her bishop that she felt "called to do something in a church without walls in an urban setting," the bishop knew just the place. McDow was appointed to First Church in summer 2017.

McDow doesn't fit the mold for a Methodist street preacher; she looks more like her Princeton Seminary degree than a noisy evangelist. She is bold and polite when she stands under the pop-up tents on Sunday morning in modest dresses and heels, lifting a cupped hand while reading scripture and projecting her voice with the cadence of a public radio host. A street preacher might be more outdoorsy than McDow, but she joins her congregation at each of the city's social justice marches and rallies, rain or shine. And she holds a blackbelt in taekwondo that she earned by sparring with a female rabbi. "We joked

Luis Antonio Pichardo



that we were sparring for messianic authority,” she laughs.

Prior to 2015, she blessed same-sex civil unions in the South with other United Methodist pastors who found ecclesiological loopholes to avoid “getting defrocked.” Now she performs same-sex marriage ceremonies and even sometimes sings her blessings, making use of her master’s degree in sacred music from Westminster Choir College. She selects transgender parishioners to read the voice of God in scripture because, as she puts it, “God’s assigned gender isn’t male or female, but both in full. God is manifesting these ideas to us and we’re just too limited to understand it.”

Tithes that bind

Despite McDow’s initial forgetfulness, First Church now takes weekly offerings alongside communion on Sundays, but that money is

just a terrible blanket reality that buildings eat up the vast majority of our budgets.”

She tells the story of a Miami pastor who recently sold her historic downtown building in response to being unable to support its costs with a transitory young urban congregation. Developers paid \$55 million, and now the congregation has a new worship space within the high rise and an endowment for its future ministry.

The trend continues up the coast to the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., where non-profit affordable housing developers such as Enterprise Community Partners are working with pastors to downsize expensive church buildings into affordable housing units.

“The reason churches close is because they can’t afford their property, they can’t afford their building, they can’t afford their pastor, they can’t afford their apportionments, and they can’t afford the overhead,”

partners as a hub for neighborhood advocacy.

“I’ve been preaching that we don’t need a building, then all of a sudden we’re looking at this building,” admits McDow. “It wouldn’t be a building because we need a building. It would be a building because we need a foothold. This grants us a foothold in Skid Row, which is the most rapidly changing, highly controversial place in the city. There needs to be an ecclesial presence there that’s willing to just sit and be a landowner, to have real skin in the game as this conversation is happening. Incarnational ministry with the poor means that you buy land there.”

The selling point for McDow isn’t only the location; it’s that the building has been used as a filming location. With this purchase, First Church would acquire a second revenue-generating property that pays for itself by meeting a market demand. As long as the economy in Los Angeles continues to

“We pay taxes, we own property, and that buys us a voice.”

sent directly to a nonprofit or to meet a specific need. “It’s not that we shouldn’t ask people to tithe,” says McDow. “Of course we should ask people to be generous with what they have.” But whereas before the congregation stretched their tithes to “make sure this church stayed open,” explains McDow, today that money is extending the church’s mission. “It’s not paying our light bill or my salary,” she says. “It’s always dedicated for some cause that we have a relationship with.”

For McDow, it all comes down to the question she regularly asks herself: How do we best love God and one another? “And the way we do that is to provide an avenue that inverts the model of church,” she explains. “For the last forever in Christendom, we’ve built buildings and invited people into it and then we ask them to pay for it.”

When I asked her how this model would work in other contexts across the country, she reminded me that everyone is burdened by their property now. “If you find me a pastor in America that’s not burdened with their property, I will gladly shake their hand and ask them what they’re doing. It’s

says McDow. “They close and sell their property because the overhead was the noose around their neck.”

Good deeds

McDow is among Christian leaders who are modeling social entrepreneurship, generating revenue from ministry-run businesses. But often, by plan or execution, these businesses do not relieve the church’s budget. Rather, they extend the church’s ministry by employing people who need jobs or generating resources for special programs. Aside from those who sublet space in their building, few church leaders are using entrepreneurship to pay for church property.

McDow differentiates herself by applying revenue from the parking lot toward the church’s bottom line. And yet the business model does not limit McDow from adding costs. First Church is in the process of buying an old Methodist church building in Skid Row. First Church is proposing to purchase the property with grants from denominational partners and share it with community

demand parking and films, she says, First Church will be able to support itself.

First Church’s model is an invitation. McDow invites church leaders to reconsider their ecclesiological and organizational habits—such as who reads certain scripture, where they meet for worship, and especially finding ways to make their property work for them so that they can do the work of their ministry.

McDow suggests churches revisit 1 Chronicles 17, where King David wants to build God a temple. “God says, ‘No, don’t do it,’” explains McDow, “and they do it anyway. God says, ‘I don’t live in a temple, my very being is beyond your structure. If you need this for you, that’s one thing, but I’m not asking for it.’ So why are we doing this? Are we doing this because we believe that God needs us to build buildings? Or are we doing it because the community needs something? What are the actual needs of your community?” ■

Hillary Frances is a freelance writer in Colorado.

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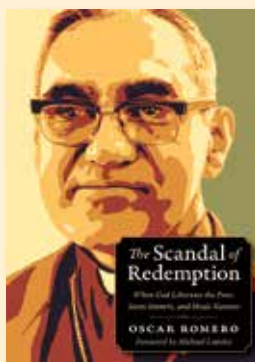
Raise Your Voice
Kathy Khang

It can be hard to speak up when power dynamics keep us silent, especially when race, ethnicity, and gender are factors. Activist and Sojourners board member Kathy Khang shows how we can raise our voices for the sake of God's justice. ivpress.com



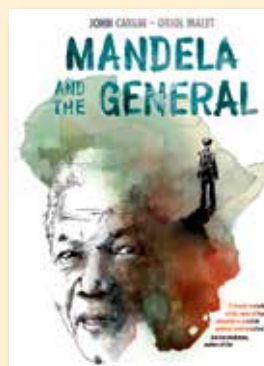
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By David Dark

Prophetic Vexation

Do we, by being polite and acceptable, abide injustice?

.....
"WE ARE WHAT WE PRETEND TO BE," Kurt Vonnegut once observed. "So we must be careful about what we pretend to be." What a funny and paradoxical and intensely true thing to say. This is indeed the drill. The world runs on pretense. We play along with norms, strengthening their power as we go, borrowing a sense of legitimacy—sometimes trading in acts of legitimation with others—in the hope of being seen by others as credible and worthy of a salaried position.

If we aren't careful, we learn to stop asking whether the reigning legitimacies in which we live and move are, in fact, good or worthy or true. When they aren't, our pretense is a form of earnest wickedness. I've gained power, a tiny world of fake legitimacy, while slowly and dutifully forfeiting my soul. I've become what I've played at and lost any righteous sense of self and others in exchange for status. Henry David Thoreau described the way his own conscience sometimes succumbed to such peer pressure thusly: "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?"

We are, of course, responsible for our own words and actions, but we're also responsible for the conflicts we avoid to more effectively get by, the lies we allow others to propagate

Igor Moukhin

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American Hate



Members of the
Russian resistance
group Pussy Riot

unchallenged in our presence. Thoreau worried over all the ways he played along and didn't raise a fuss in the face of the terrors his government enacted and the subtle fashion in which his own behavior, by proving polite and acceptable, abided injustice.

There's a time to stop pretending, to kneel during the anthem, to firmly address a senator in an elevator, to refuse service to a press secretary in a restaurant, or, if you're Therese Patricia Okoumou, to climb onto the foot of the Statue of Liberty on the Fourth of July to publicly demand the return of the terrorized children of asylum-seeking families to their parents. Is it a subtle form of demonic possession that keeps us from doing these things more often? Are we worried about vexing someone?

With an eye on where risking vexation can get you, the poet-priest Daniel Berrigan once proposed an adage: "If you want to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood."

Such lines are typical of the dark humor and prophetic seriousness I associate with Berrigan and his brother, Philip, but they are of a piece with a long life of steadfast joy. Beware when all people speak well of you, Jesus warns, for this is a sign of a false prophet. If your alleged devotion to God is not met with resistance, you are doubtless doing it wrong. Keep religion out of politics? Stay in your lane? Every news cycle—and

Pussy Riot's punk prayer resides along a trajectory of deep continuity with the early church.

even a cursory reading of the prophets and the gospels—reminds us our common life does not work this way.

If we are what we normalize, we'll need to be alive to all the ways we can withdraw our consent or flip the given script when avenues for doing so are placed before us. For Daniel Berrigan, one such opportunity arose as a 1968 trip to Hanoi with historian Howard Zinn to bring out three American prisoners of war being released by North Vietnam. There Berrigan hid in bomb shelters, held infants, and took in the scenery. He experienced the facts on the ground as a live-action lesson in all the ways "American power" serves as "the active, virulent enemy of human hope." His conviction concerning the psychic toll of endless war intensified.

Meanwhile, Philip had begun to take courage from younger men refusing induction into the military and suffering imprisonment for it. Wanting to engage the crisis himself in a way that involved risk, he had walked into Baltimore's Selective Service Board with artist Tom Lewis, poet David Eberhardt, and minister Jim Mengel, who handed out copies of the New Testament while the other three opened draft files and poured blood over them. Lest anyone misunderstand the meaning of their action, they also passed out leaflets containing the following statement: "This sacrificial and constructive act is meant to protest the pitiful waste of American and Vietnamese blood in Indochina."

Continued on Page 43

New & Noteworthy

Power of the Word

Preaching as Resistance: Voices of Hope, Justice, and Solidarity, edited by Phil Snider, is a collection of 30 sermons that confront forces of injustice and authoritarianism and proclaim gospel hope.

Contributors include Wil Gafney, Jeff Chu, José F. Morales Jr., and Sojourners' own Layton E. Williams. Chalice Press



Love and Community

In *Redeeming Dementia: Spirituality, Theology, and Science*, Dorothy Linthicum and Janice Hicks offer insights on a theology of the human person to empower people of faith to better embrace and advocate for those with dementia. Includes stories of innovative programs in churches and care facilities. Church Publishing

Waiting, Watching, Singing

Pastors and worship leaders can find rich resources for seasonal services in *After the Longest Night: Songs for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany*, an album and songbook by Steve Thorngate. The album is beautiful for personal contemplative listening as well. SteveThorngateMusic.com

Positive Change

In *"Jesus Saved an Ex-Con": Political Activism and Redemption After Incarceration*, sociologist Edward Orozco Flores explores how some formerly incarcerated persons strive to change unjust structures and societal attitudes through community organizing and personal stories of redemption. New York University Press



When Zeal Turns Tragic

ON THE MORNING of June 23, 2014, a 79-year-old retired Methodist minister, Charles Moore, parked his Volkswagen hatchback in a strip mall parking lot in his old hometown of Grand Saline, Texas. For most of the day he stood in the lot, watching the cars go by on U.S. Highway 80. Sometime after 5:30 p.m., Moore set a small foam cushion on the parking lot asphalt, knelt on the cushion, poured gasoline over himself, and set himself on fire.

That act of public suicide provides the starting point for the PBS Independent Lens documentary *Man on Fire*, available for viewing online starting Dec. 17. The hour-long film is a sustained reflection both on Moore's life as an especially stubborn perennial dissident and on the life of the town where his journey began and ended.

When Moore died, he left behind a neatly typed testimony tucked under a windshield wiper of his car, which portrayed his suicide as an act of solidarity with the untold numbers of African Americans lynched and brutalized in a town

Turns out Charles Moore had been metaphorically setting himself on fire for several decades before he made it literal. He left a promising career as a young Methodist pastor because he couldn't keep quiet about racial injustice. For years, he lived and worked among the urban poor, as a white man in the virtually all-black West Side of Chicago during the angriest years of the late 1960s, and later amid the shanties of what is now called Mumbai,

India. When he eventually returned to a Methodist pastorate, Moore became an early advocate for gay rights and undertook a long hunger strike to pressure his denomination to become accepting of LGBTQ people.

But, as his sobbing stepdaughter tells us in the film, Moore didn't just sacrifice himself. He didn't think about the consequences of his actions

for the people who loved him, she says. He didn't just go to the West Side of Chicago himself, he brought his two young sons and his first wife, Pat, who in the film maintains that Moore compromised the safety of his family with that move. And that was just the beginning. In the mid-1970s, Moore took Pat with him to India, leaving their 11- and 16-year-old sons on their own to stay with families of various colleagues. Both boys' lives fell apart during that time, information in the *Texas Monthly*

From the poster for *Man on Fire*.



article that we don't get from the documentary film.

However, the film's portrait of Grand Saline does give viewers a good idea how the young Charles Moore's prophetic outrage was ignited. Most of the townspeople interviewed are still doggedly evasive about the town's racist history. Some insist that Moore took his life in protest of conditions that never existed, while others simply discount any responsibility for the past. A white Grand Saline Baptist preacher actually says, "You can't pay for someone else's sins."

Still, I'd have to give the last word on Charles Moore's self-immolation to one of his Grand Saline detractors who, rather smugly, points out the incontrovertible fact: "You're not a martyr if you do it to yourself." ■

Danny Duncan Collum, author of the novel *White Boy*, teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.

Charles Moore had been metaphorically setting himself on fire for several decades.

that was still largely unrepentant. On the dashboard of Moore's car was a copy of his high school yearbook, presumably to prove to Grand Saline authorities that he was in fact one of their own, although he hadn't really lived there for decades.

On its face, Moore's suicide sounds like the tragic act of a man mired in depression and possibly even delusions. But the story becomes more complex when you read Michael Hall's long article, also titled "Man on Fire," from the December 2014 issue of *Texas Monthly*.



Continued from Page 41

Philip would eventually receive a six-year sentence for this action, possibly making him the first modern American Catholic priest to be tried and imprisoned for having committed a political crime. Before his case went to trial, he felt compelled by God to perform another liturgical raid on the sacrosanct, the paperwork of American war-making. Daniel was unsure, but he was committed to praying the matter through. What's a self-respecting Jesuit citizen to do? Daniel Berrigan famously characterized his dilemma this way: "I was in danger of verbalizing my moral impulses out of existence." Anybody know the feeling? I imagine these words name the danger we're all in. If not them, who? If not now, when? Berrigan later articulated the state of play:

Who owned the tradition, anyway; and who was worthy to speak on its behalf? ... The tradition was a precious voice, a presence, a Person. The war had silenced the voice, outlawed the Person. Church and state had agreed, as they inevitably did in time of war, that the Person was out of fashion, "for the duration." He had nothing to offer in the face of guns ... He was a prisoner of war this Jesus. He was in a species of protective custody.

And yet, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it: files, designated areas, the whole of it. Could they keep their vows to be ambassadors of God's righteous order without vexing the nation-state? They would bring the liturgical forms entrusted to them by their tradition to the war-making liturgies of their government, whose enlisting of young men to commit acts of violence upon the people and the land of Vietnam constituted, biblically speaking, a demonic stronghold. On May 17, 1968, they joined seven other activists and walked into a draft board in Catonsville, Md., removed papers with the names of young men scheduled to be conscripted, and conducted the prayerful burning of draft files with homemade napalm.

Apologizing for their fracture of what they could no longer abide as "good order," and noting that they were no longer able to say "peace, peace" when there is no peace, they observed that they thought it fitting to burn paper instead of children: "We could not so help us God do otherwise." As the fire



From *Blaze*

ART AND ACCOUNTABILITY

IN THE FILM *BLAZE*, directed by actor Ethan Hawke, happiness is rare and meaning always seems slightly out of reach, just around the corner. An unconventional, compelling biopic of Blaze Foley, a country musician who died too young, and violently, *Blaze* is a challenging alternative to familiar rags-to-riches tales. It's rags-to-slightly-more-fashionable-rags, where the loneliness of the road is never salved by the acclaim of a crowd, the price of art being the very life of the artist.

As a movie about the pain of making music, it's up there with *Tender Mercies*, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, and *Dreamgirls*. As a biopic it gets closer to the inner life of its subject than most—Ben Dickey's hypnotic lead performance embodies the drive to write, to sing, to perform, even if no one's watching. "He knew the value of zero," says iconic songwriter Townes van Zandt in the film. Van Zandt is played by Charlie Sexton, one of van Zandt's cultural heirs and a frequent member of Bob Dylan's band. The value of zero here is the notion that what we're most called to in life is authenticity, whatever the reward.

But authenticity without accountability can lead us to ask someone else to carry weight that is legitimately ours. Life is not a solo performance, so those whose gift is to entertain or provoke in public have work to do to keep

propaganda from blinding them to their own flaws. Sybil Rosen, who partnered with Foley in life and co-wrote the film, carries so much for him—working without affirmation to buy his guitar, waiting, hoping. And it's not enough. But her character in *Blaze* isn't self-pitying (nor is Alia Shawkat's fully alive performance), just a sad reminder of what happens when we divorce the fire of creativity from mature community.

There's a story that one of the world's best-known musicians takes a replica of his own living room on tour so he can conjure the feeling of walking off his bus straight into his house. This is an imaginative solution to being on the road more nights than being at home. Minstrels, storytellers, and movement-builders have always wandered, sharing their gifts, nourishing the people, hopefully leaving a slightly better world in their wake. But there's a cost to such wandering. We all need a circle of meaningful friendships whose participants have our best interests at heart; we all need wisdom figures who care more about our well-being than their egos. Neither are automatic. Like meaning over happiness, they need to be pursued. ■

Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and founder of moviesandmeaning.com and www.irelandretreats.com.

burned, they punctuated this purposeful ritual by reciting the Lord's Prayer.

What was accomplished? They went to jail. The Berrigan brothers were placed on the cover of *Time* magazine. It was a palpable hit in the sense that it made the news for a time. Similar nonviolent actions were undertaken and continue into our day, now aimed at nuclear weapons facilities, the most recent at a Navy submarine base in Kings Bay, Ga., last spring. These endeavors are often staged under the moniker of the Plowshares Movement and pose, as the prophetic always does, the question of authority. Who do we credit and why? Who speaks for God?

THE ACTIONS OF the Catonsville Nine, 50 years on, are like a clarifying, largely buried memory in American history, but such moments of clarity persist. Six years before making headlines by disrupting the World Cup this past summer, members of the Pussy Riot protest collective were charged

symbols" of God's righteous demands "are being replaced by those that are diametrically opposed to them" and that liturgies of conscience like their own are essential. While Putin pitched their art as an attack on religion, members of Pussy Riot argue that it's their devotion to right religion under persecution.

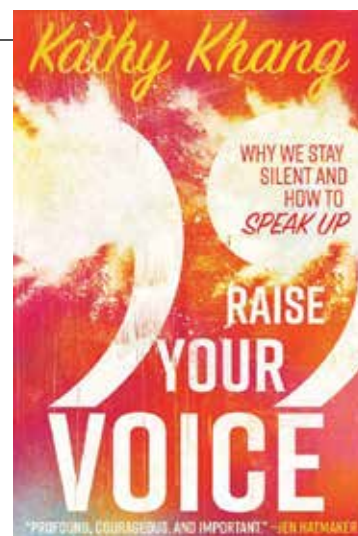
Citing Socrates as a righteous irritant in ancient Athens as well as the apostle Stephen's death by stoning in the book of Acts, another Pussy Riot member, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, places their witness alongside that of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who insisted that, in time, artful words will break the cement of tyrants. Nevertheless, the collective noted that they would be happy to repent of any alleged indiscretion so long as Putin joined them in repenting of his own crimes and committed to confining himself to a monastery. "Our trial," they argued, "showed the world the face of the judicial system and the current government, which is afraid of truth and smiles."

What do we have to fear from truth, smiles, and observational candor? Nothing at all if the power we have isn't dependent on keeping anyone quiet, if we live in the hope of more transparency, not less, in our everyday doings with others. "We are intimately

related," Fred Rogers once observed. "May we never even pretend that we are not."

But pretend we do, denying the fact of relationship at every turn to, as the saying goes, get ahead. But it's never too late to turn around, to risk the vexingly prophetic move together with others. Avenues for these risky moves are everywhere and ever before us. One human exchange at a time. ■

David Dark is the author of four books, most recently Life's Too Short to Pretend You're Not Religious. An assistant professor of religion and the arts at Belmont University, he also teaches at the Tennessee Prison for Women.



Reviewed by Katie Dubielak

MUTED NO MORE

Raise Your Voice: Why We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up, by Kathy Khang. IVP Books.

I MET KATHY KHANG last summer. She joked about turning to Korean face masks and wine in her times of need; I immediately thought to myself that we'd really get along. Fortunately, her expertise in crafting both engaging conversation and knockout tweets (@mskathykhang) translates well into her latest book, *Raise Your Voice: Why We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up*.

Khang, who emigrated from Korea to the U.S. as a child, has worked in various settings, including newsrooms and university campus ministries. She brings her journalism and ministry experience to activism, recognizing that social justice always involves multiple intersections of race, gender, orientation, faith, politics, and more.

Raise Your Voice is an authentic diagnosis of, and antidote to, the deafening silence from many women and minorities in the workplace, politics, the world, and, most potentially, in our spiritual and worship spaces. Khang crosses social, cultural, professional, and generational boundaries to create a tool useful to anyone who has ever felt either like they didn't have a voice, or that their voice was taken from them.

The author walks us through many facets of power and speech: why we don't speak up, how to find our voice, how to prepare to speak up, how to speak up, and how to care for ourselves after we have spoken up. Khang helpfully organizes her advice into bulleted lists that guide us through each step of the journey. (A cheer goes up from



The Catonsville Nine burn draft files in 1968.

with "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" and sentenced to prison for staging a performance of "Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!" in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.

Pussy Riot's punk prayer resides along a trajectory of deep continuity with the early church, a continuity interrupted by the Russian Orthodox Church's alliance with the Putin regime and exemplified, most recently, by the Moscow Patriarchate threatening to sever ties with the global Orthodox communion if the Orthodox Church in Ukraine is granted ecclesiastical independence. Noting this co-option, Pussy Riot member Maria Alyokhina believes the "meanings and

the generation addicted to the “10 ways to ...” article format.) The work of raising your voice begins within yourself, but it includes many levels of culpability within our spiritual, political, and professional spheres. Khang’s advice centers around the individual, but communities can learn from it as well.

Khang effortlessly makes each chapter personal in nature, but universal in applicability. She sprinkles deeply personal examples of feeling voiceless between biblical revelations. (For example, Moses was as insecure as the rest of us and tried multiple times to refuse a very specific call from God. In Khang’s words, “Who does he think he is?”) From being physically silenced in her workplace to overcompensating with excuses for choosing not to speak up during her time in ministry, Khang exposes her deepest insecurities and hopes to the reader.

Khang reminds us of Esther, the near perfect biblical example of a minority woman forced to assimilate and pass in a majority space. Esther’s original name is Hadassah; Kathy Khang was Khang KyoungAh before she was Kathy. By pushing aside the parts of themselves that were no longer advantageous in the majority space, Kathy and Esther learned to survive. But Khang reminds us that “the parts of our story that get lost or buried can only stay hidden for so long if we want to truly be whole and become who God created us to be.”

One of the most important points of the book is the need for intense self-care before, during, and after raising our voice. After all, “God did not spend a metaphorical six days on creating to spend the seventh day fretting.” Her three tenets are rest, restore, and be ready to go. Woven throughout this advice is the constant reminder that while an intentional practice of self-care is important, the form for each person will be unique.

Khang is a talented writer, but beyond that she is a woman of God and an expert at diagnosing room for growth. Do yourself a favor: Pick up this book and allow her to remind you to strive to know more deeply how God sees you, and to rest in the comfort that we are on this journey together. ■

Katie Dubielak is executive assistant at the True Colors Fund in Washington, D.C.

Reviewed by Julie Polter

‘EVEN TO THE END OF THE AGE’

***A Shaking Reality: Daily Reflections for Advent*, by Peter B. Price. Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd. dltbooks.com. *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, by Fleming Rutledge. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.**

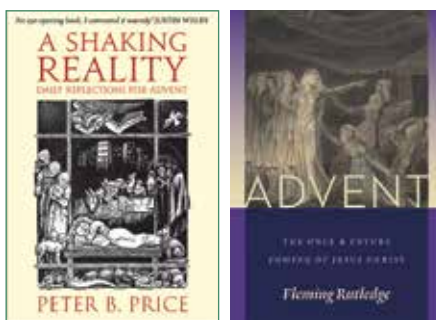
TWO NEW ADVENT-THEMED books bring deep wisdom for this liturgical season.

Peter B. Price is a retired Church of England bishop with decades of experience advocating on the ground and in the halls of power for peace and reconciliation in conflict situations around the world. His new book, *A Shaking Reality: Daily Reflections for Advent*, takes its title from a mediation written by a German priest, Alfred Delp, S.J., while imprisoned by the Nazis.

Price reflects on Delp (who was later executed for being in the resistance) and the “courage and witness” of others in these graceful meditations for each day of Advent. He writes about the world’s brokenness from his sensibilities as a pastor—acknowledging structures that harm and oppress, while guiding readers toward what Delp called “God’s promise of redemption and release.”

Fleming Rutledge is an Episcopal priest and respected author, theologian, and preacher. Her new book, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, collects sermons, writings, and other resources from a more-than-40-year career.

Rutledge writes, “It might be said of Advent that it is not for the faint of heart.”



This is a deep dive into Advent (and the preceding Sundays after All Saints Day) as a season focused on apocalypse, the Second Coming, and the ethical choices facing believers who watch and wait for God on the move, while being also called to “live a life of meaningful action.”

Rutledge writes with elegance,

learnedness, and clarity, demonstrating a preacher’s gift for combining challenging insights with food for the journey. Throughout this collection her true focus is never doom but hope in Christ who has come and will come again—a promise that will endure through both natural and human disasters. ■

Julie Polter is a senior associate editor of Sojourners.

Reviewed by Robert Hirschfield

TARGETED FOR WHO THEY ARE

***American Hate: Survivors Speak Out*, ed. by Arjun Singh Sethi. The New Press.**

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to *American Hate*, Arjun Singh Sethi warns readers: “The pages that follow are not for the faint of heart, but neither is this moment.”

The hate crime survivors he spotlights speak with the stunned, searching voices of aggrieved neighbors: Syrian Muslims, Sikhs, Lebanese Christians, African Americans, Southeast Asians, Jews, and Native Americans. Sethi, a 37-year-old Sikh lawyer from Washington, D.C., shatters the complacent notion that hate crimes in the U.S. target only Muslims or unlucky Sikhs mistaken for Muslims.

Sethi’s book is evidence of the current civic plague of top-down moral dysfunction. President Trump, he writes, while “exercising the worst form of bully pulpit,” has “emboldened, empowered, enabled, facilitated, and legitimized the very worst in America: racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and anti-immigrant hostility.”

Sethi’s pained witness can doubtlessly be traced to his own history of being bullied growing up, even as he absorbed his community’s culture of empathy for other

targeted communities and, sometimes, for the perpetrators. In August 2012, a white supremacist massacred six Sikhs at their Oak Creek, Wis. *gurdwara* (place of worship). “When the Sikh community later gathered,” Sethi writes, “they recited their holy prayer, the *ardaas*, and mourned those they lost. But they also prayed for the soul of the shooter.”

The damaged souls of perpetrators emerges as a theme in more than one of the book’s accounts of the pain, solitude, and resurrected lives of survivors and their families. Sethi documents one of the FBI’s 6,121 reported hate crimes in 2016: the murder of Khalid Jabara, a Lebanese-Christian killed by Stanley Vernon Majors in Tulsa, Okla. Majors, the Jabara family’s next-door neighbor, hurled racial epithets at them for years and had previously run over Haifa Jabara, Khalid’s mother, with his car. Majors was out on bond when he shot Khalid to death. Having learned that Majors was abandoned by his mother when he was 3 months old, and his only home growing up was his father’s car, Victoria Jabara, Khalid’s sister, expressed

compassion: “The guy next door didn’t have a community. Maybe he never did.”

In the age of social media, Sethi observes, a hate crime is not necessarily a crime of physical violence. It can also be psychological violence. Tanya Gersh, a Jewish real estate agent from Whitefish, Mont., and Taylor Dumpson, the first African-American woman to be elected student government president at American University in D.C., were both cyber-harassed by The Daily Stormer neo-Nazi website. After a dispute arose between Gersh and white nationalist/alt right leader Richard Spencer’s mother, the Stormer posted pictures of Gersh and her family, along with their phone numbers, email addresses, and street address, inviting readers to bring their indignation to her doorstep. She was tormented by hundreds of calls and emails with comments such as “Thanks for demonstrating why your race needs to be collectively ovened.”

On Dumpson’s first full day in office as



AU’s student body president, bananas were found hanging from nooses made of black nylon rope on the campus. In response to news stories about the incident, Daily Stormer publisher Andrew Anglin mocked Dumpson on his site and encouraged a troll storm against her.

Both Gersh and Dumpson were later diagnosed with PTSD.

Sethi laments the dearth of a public outcry against hate crimes. But he points to interfaith communities such as those in Victoria, Texas, that helped rebuild the local mosque that was burned to the ground the week Trump signed the first Muslim travel ban, and in Tulsa, where the B’nai Emunah Congregation named its preschool library the Khalid Jabara Tikkun Olam Library.

Sethi’s book is a wake-up call. It is impossible to read *American Hate* and go back to sleep. ■

Robert Hirschfield is a New York City-based freelance writer.

EXCERPT

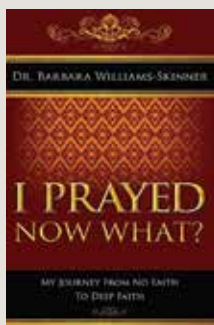
LEADING THROUGH PRAYER

by Barbara Williams-Skinner

I HAD HONED MY SKILLS as a leader in the backfield, first in the black power struggle and later as executive director of the influential body of African American congressional leaders that made up the Congressional Black Caucus. I also worked quietly as a bridge builder between leaders of diverse backgrounds.

But after my husband Tom Skinner’s passing, I was voted by the board of directors to become president of the Skinner Leadership Institute. As the number two person in the organization, I had relied more on external skills of leadership like executing the vision, establishing goals, strategic planning, and creating, as well as managing the budget.

Thrust into the uncomfortable role of out-front leader, I needed to rely more on internal qualities. To move people from “one point to the other and get them to like it,” as Tom often defined leadership, required strength of character, spiritual and moral excellence, integrity, team building,



sustaining win-win relationships, emotional intelligence, and resilience. Inner qualities built not in meeting rooms, but through the spiritual discipline of prayer.

As a very private person pushed into the position of highly public leadership, I needed prayer to build relationships with people whose values were very different from mine. I needed an accelerated prayer life to make wise decisions that impacted the organization and the lives of others who depended on me. But most of all, I needed not just prayer, but periods of solitude, renewal, and spiritual reflection to handle the rigor, the setbacks, the disappointments, and indeed the loneliness of leadership. ■

Adapted with permission from I Prayed, Now What? My Journey from No Faith to Deep Faith, by Barbara Williams-Skinner. www.skinnerleaders.org

No More Cover-Ups

I AM ROMAN CATHOLIC, and I want to apologize. Apparently, a portion of my church not only believes in but still practices child sacrifice.

The Pennsylvania grand jury report was clear. It opened: “We, the members of this grand jury, need you to hear this. We know some of you have heard some of it before. There have been other reports about child sex abuse within the Catholic Church. But never on this scale. For many of us, those earlier stories happened someplace else, someplace away. Now we know the truth: It happened everywhere.”

For more than 30 years, investigations around the world have revealed similar patterns in Catholic institutions. Priests, bishops, cardinals, and even popes have decided that the Roman Catholic Church is too big to fail—that per-



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leave Catholic leadership. It's time for lay-led accountability at every level—from the parish council and seminary to the Vatican. If every U.S. Catholic priest resigned tomorrow, most parishes would continue to celebrate Mass, support the youth group, pray with the Legion of Mary, run the food pantry, provide religious instruction, clean the church, and baptize, marry, and bury.

Perhaps Catholic churches could then mature into Vatican II communities—led by the “fully conscious and active participation” of the people of God, in dialogue with other faiths, guided by Holy Wisdom, scripture, and tradition, and rooted in a sacramental vision of this world and the world to come.

As one priest told me, “It's time for a third Vatican council.” I agree. The integrity of the church's moral and charitable leadership is mortally wounded. However, Vatican III cannot be only a synod of penitential princes. As Audre Lorde put it so eloquently, “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” Vatican III must center those marginalized—not only those broken by the world, but also by the church. Through them, the crucified Christ speaks—a voice no “confidentiality agreement” can silence.

ADVENT IS A season to examine ends of worlds or, as Thomas Merton put it, “a theological point of no return.” We face the void out of which men with crosses

have drawn the calculating cunning of their grooming, the void that sermonizes in the vicious purity codes of religious and moral leaders, spiritual advisers, megachurch pastors.

Our theological point of no return is not only confessional—it's political. Euro-American Catholics helped elect Herod to the White House. Herod: a king of rages who sends out agents to hunt down children. Herod: with a mania so violent that Roman emperor Augustus savagely punned he'd rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son.

Amid announcements of inquiries, resignations, updated protocols, hotlines to report bishops, subpoenas, indictments, impeachments, “we've been through this before,” and “it happened in the past, not now”—we who are responsible must stand before the Unspeakable void, wounded, threatened, confused, defenseless.

We stand not in despair, but in humility and pray the Confiteor unceasingly: “I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do ...”

Only then might God trust us again with a Child. ■

Rose Marie Berger, a Sojourners senior associate editor, is a Catholic peace activist and poet.

It's time for these idolaters to leave Catholic leadership.

petrators of child abuse should be “bailed out” and victims given cash and gag orders to protect the idol of a religious corporation.

Since medieval times the Catholic Church has operated as an artificial legal persona to put property in perpetual collective ownership: the first legal corporation. If diocesan priests are considered “shareholders,” then the Catholic Corporation has willingly sacrificed children in the name of shareholder protection, betraying any legitimate “pro-life” ethic it might publicly promote. In the Bible this profanity is called the “worship of Molech,” an ancient god of Israel's enemies: Molech's outstretched arms of bronze were held in fire until red-hot, then living children were placed in his hands.

It's time for these idolaters to



Clothe Yourself with Love

A CLOTHESLINE IS AN ODD IMAGE for Advent spirituality, but it dances before my eyes, reminding me of the pleasure I had as a child helping my grandmother hang out our clothes to dry in the back garden. How fresh they smelled when we took them down! Those who have to use dryers may never know what they are missing.

After Christmas, we will be reading from Colossians about the new styles of being human that the Incarnation attracts us to try out for ourselves. After stripping ourselves to put on the baptismal self, each layer of our new outfit is “pegged out” on the line for us to admire and try on. “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ... Above all clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (3:12, 14). This same passage goes on to invite us to take seriously that meditation on scripture is a foundational

Christian practice, not an optional one. Each of us must find our way of internalizing scripture, celebrating and investigating it in the inner space and landscape of our unique selves. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (3:16). Advent is a visitation to us of “words of Christ” that we need to invite in and entertain. Words of Christ as the coming Human One, our New Self, the indwelling Presence with which we are pregnant, the young Christ growing into God’s call.



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[DECEMBER 2]

God's Grace or Political Chaos?

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

IT IS HARD to find a foothold in the plethora of images of cosmic chaos with which Luke surrounds Jesus’ predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. The firmest grip is offered by the central image found in a specific quotation from the Book of Daniel: “Then they will see ‘the Human One [often translated “Son of Man”] coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27). The Human One in Daniel’s apocalypse is an artful symbol of God’s own chosen people, contrasting sharply with the monsters in the cosmic melodrama who represent the various pagan empires that have successively oppressed Israel. In Daniel the “coming in a cloud” of the Human One is definitely not a coming from heaven to earth. The

Where God's mercy strikes home, structures of privilege buckle and give way.

movement is in the opposite direction; the coming is an upward movement to God in order to be claimed, blessed, and vindicated. “And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him” (Daniel 7:13). This symbolic coming to the divine throne is a coded expression of hope that in all the chaos of human politics and despite the suffering and powerlessness of those who remain faithfully in covenant with God, vindication is certain because God’s grace will ultimately triumph. The expectation of many Christians today that Jesus will “come back” from heaven to earth to rule the planet is not consistent with the original symbol at all. We have our work cut out for us to restore the original sense of the coming of the Human One.

[DECEMBER 9]

The Refiner's Fire

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

IN A SERIES OF workshops a few years ago, I asked small groups to put together their own summaries of Jesus’ teaching. Often the disillusioning results hardly went beyond vague assertions that Jesus “replaced the Old Testament God of judgment with a God of love.” Liberal religious culture is so “judgment averse” (in reaction to fundamentalism) that many have difficulty grasping that the coming of God’s grace and truth exposes and calls to account everything false and toxic in human relations, politics, business—and religion.

Missing the importance of the judgment theme in Advent muffles the impact of Christmas. In this season, millions will hear Malachi’s words read or sung as part of Handel’s *Messiah*. How many will connect the prophet’s holding to account of a corrupt temple priesthood with current events such as the crisis in the Roman Catholic Church over institutional failure to protect its children from clerical sexual predators? “For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap ... and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver” (3:2-3). The treason of the clergy is no new thing. Time and again religious officials collectively betray the trust given to them, so Malachi makes God’s priority a thoroughgoing reform of the temple officials by sending a “messenger of the covenant.” John’s gospel will symbolize Jesus’ assumption of this role by transferring the shocking story of his disruption of the temple’s “business as usual” to the very beginning of his ministry.

[DECEMBER 16]

John the Drencher

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

“WITH JOY YOU will draw water from the wells of salvation,” we are promised in the poem of Isaiah (12:3). However far our technologies are taking many human beings from dependency on wells for survival, we

can never dispense with this archetypal imagery. We must go again to the waters to replenish our sense of repentance. John the Drencher invites us there in the gospel passage. His baptism is not a discreet sprinkling but a sousing and drenching, to wash off the stink of forgetfulness, entitlement, indolence, and self-absorption so we can begin again our recognition of responsibility for one another.

Our first steps after taking the plunge will be to unblock the inner wellspring of compassion for our fellow human beings in need: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (3:11). Paul’s injunction to “rejoice in the Lord, always” (Philippians 4:4) is another reminder that joy is invariably the sign that we are actively drawing on the inner well of the heart where healing and wholeness continually bubble up from the indwelling Spirit. Joy snaps us out of our fascination with what is toxic, degrading, ugly, and divisive in the world around us and urges us to become witnesses to God’s tenderness, beauty, and intimacy: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near” (4:5).

[DECEMBER 23]

Prophetic Cousins

Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7;
Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

OVER THE YEARS those who act as spiritual guides acquire an extraordinary amount of data about the inner workings of grace in the heart. I can certainly vouch for this fact that many others report: When people pray seriously with scripture, sooner or later Mary, the mother of Jesus, unexpectedly makes an appearance, attracting and intriguing us as a powerful focus of God’s grace. It often takes those with a Protestant heritage by surprise.

Perhaps this Sunday’s gospel, recounting the pregnant Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth, may help us be open to our own visitation. Who does Mary want to be for us now? Luke presents her as the supreme prophetic witness to the unwavering consistency of God’s tender regard for the forgotten and discounted. All generations

will call her blessed as the ultimate proof that God’s “mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50). In her song of praise, this tender regard is celebrated for its power to disrupt what seems fated and inevitable. Divine mercy has a cutting edge of judgment. Where God’s mercy strikes home, structures of privilege that seem permanent buckle and give way. “He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away” (1:53).

[DECEMBER 30]

A Child’s God

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148;
Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

LUKE’S STORY OF the 12-year-old Jesus staying behind in the temple to discuss theology with the experts and teachers is quite poignant. Jesus is asserting his independence already and claiming the right to be in his “Father’s house” (Luke 2:49). His mother’s anxiety over three days of separation shows that “a sword” is piercing her own soul (2:35), as Simeon had predicted. Jesus’ increase in wisdom and years has a price. Self-differentiation inflicts pain. The reading from 1 Samuel evokes the image of the little boy Samuel living apart from his parents in service to the shrine of the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh.

I wonder how many readers resonate with these stories because they confirm our experience that the religious experience of children can be profound, authentic, rich. Does our preaching really take that into account? I remember as a young boy with a deep sense of calling from God—all the stranger because mine was a non-Christian household—often visiting the little art museum in my hometown after school to contemplate an oil painting of “the infant Samuel.” It’s not great art, but it was a powerful icon for me back then, telling me that grace can indeed take hold of our lives when we are very young—it’s not just a matter of being precocious. ■

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What, This Again?

TIME, THE GREAT healer, had almost cleansed my memory of “The Nashville Statement,” that unhelpful treatise from conservative Christians insisting that gay people keep their hands to themselves, despite being squeezed together in the closets they should return to, biblically. But now, only a year later, another document comes out, equally unhelpful, and almost identical in its utter lack of theological necessity.

It’s called “For the Sake of Christ and His Church: The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel,” and to its credit, it omits the Nashville sex talk, no doubt a disappointment to Bible belters always eager for an excuse to get sweaty and judgmental. The new statement instead focuses on another topic: justice.

Drafted by pastor and author John MacArthur (yeah, I’d never heard of him either) and other Christian leaders, it assumes Christians have grown weary of turning the other cheek (so tedious)



the gospel without perverting it into another gospel. This also means that implications and applications of the gospel, such as the obligation to live justly in the world ... are not definitional components of the gospel.”

“Perverting it,” eh? Well, I guess he had to put in a prurient element to keep people reading. But I’m SO glad to hear we have no obligation to live justly. *Whew!* And that new parable of the Bad Samaritan has important life lessons for the busy Christian walking and texting: no need to cross the road. (A “like” on Facebook is as good as helping, right?)

Naturally, the statement was originally signed by 1,400 of the usual suspects. (I’m not saying it was mainly old white guys but, as an old white guy myself, I’ve got my suspicions.) And it’s peppered with the predictable denunciations of “radical feminism” and the like, just to stay in the comfort zone of Jurassic Christians, people who don’t believe in evolution because then they might have to evolve.

THE “SOCIAL JUSTICE” statement is just the latest in the unrelenting efforts of conservative Christians to water down the gospel. It’s what I call the “de-Jesus-ification of Christianity,” an expression that is as urgently poignant as it is difficult to say without getting spittle on your shirt.

By stripping away the liberating components of the gospel that call for justice for the downtrodden, it pretty much ignores most of the red letters of the New Testament. It ain’t Jesus, and it’s not even the Apostle Paul—that bountiful refuge for literalists. (Although maybe it’s Paul on a really bad day. His Third Letter to the Corinthians was returned unopened because the addressees felt he was getting a little bossy.)

Using scripture without prioritizing the teachings of Jesus is what proof-texters have been doing, like, forever. Not that it’s hard, since the Bible is a rich trove of admonitions and behaviors that veteran cherry-pickers can use to validate almost anything, from celebrations with or without dancing to infanticide, fratricide, and even being put to death if you work on the Sabbath. (Note to editors at Hippo: See what happens when you rush a project?)

PICKING AND choosing verses to rationalize your belief system is like playing Bible Twister, but without the physical contact that could lead to stern abstinence counseling.

De-emphasizing the justice components of the Bible completely ignores the words of the prophets, not to mention the life and witness of Jesus, who would be turning over in his grave right now had he not vacated it soon after burial. (Sons of God don’t stay buried long, which is why their families never sign perpetual care contracts beforehand.)

But when pastors issue another missive that desperately clings to tribal notions, they’re just rolling another stone in front of that grave. It’s their way of trying to keep Jesus—and that silly justice stuff—out of sight. ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

When you’re wrong once, why not twice?

or loving your neighbor as yourself (BORING!) and asserts that the gospel has nothing to do with empathy or working for the common good.

“WE DENY that political or social activism should be viewed as integral components of the gospel or primary to the mission of the church.”

You pretty much knew where the author was heading with those first capital letters. “WE DENY” sets a certain tone that brooks no discussion, offers no compromise, and please don’t let my granddaughter hear of it or she’ll be even more expressive when refusing her her vegetables.

It goes on:

“WE DENY that anything else, whether works to be performed or opinions to be held, can be added to

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